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MIDDLEGROUND

BY

THE AUTHOR OF "MASTERING FLAME"

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MIDDLEGROUND

I

"CONFOUND the boy!" Pembroke kicked a chair out of his way, as he stalked the length of the living-room. "Might know he'd take this very time to get himself ill—looks rotten seedy, too. Well! Just my beastly luck; train one servant to fill the place of five—and keep a devilish quieter tongue about it—and pouf! Off he goes, limping to bed, just when I need him most.

"No"—the young man halted, brought his lips together with peculiar tenseness. "I wouldn't have anyone but Ping here to-night," he finished slowly, "for every shilling I have on earth."

And he left off fuming, and began to arrange

the room; carefully, bit by bit; standing off to squint fastidiously through his brilliant blue eyes—and whistling softly.

The window-seat, with its charming purple hangings and tea-table; the piano, littered with sheet music and the scores of operas; the broad low couch—a man's couch, yet luxurious with down-filled cushions; the few excellent pictures on the tan walls, broken by long windows open on to the veranda; the quaint teak settle in one corner: no detail of the delightful room escaped the criticism of those searching eyes. The young man saw it in sum, and part by part. "H'm—it'll do," he said finally; "even for her."

He was rather a wonderful young man, who—deprived of his one servant Ping—alone in his bungalow, made ready for "her." One of those rarely splendid young men who, one feels, will stand scrutiny in sections; who in the superb arrogance of their beauty, may be on even patronizing terms with the microscope. A young man, in short, whose points

were his every point; who had not to impress —only to respond. But he was no fool. He had come out to Shanghai a pampered and by no means poverty-stricken younger son; and he had grasped a business and made a fortune out of it, in spite of the sharpers who pursued him, and the ladies who inveigled him—or tried to. Ask the hardened old tea-merchants, his confrères, who watched him out of their shifty, sceptical eyes with unwilling admiration. They would tell you, to a man: Louis Pembroke was nobody's dupe. Not even—altogether—his own; which is somewhat unusual, at twenty-nine.

He was, however, responsive—dangerously so. To the beautiful, the bizarre, the superfine; to the fitful three o'clock sun that was at that moment warming spots of his tan walls to yellow, to the irregular, murky vista that spread away from his own drive down fantastic Bubbling Well Road. For he looked, from one of the open windows, down the road—almost dreamily; then with a tumultuous

movement, towards the closed door of a room beyond.

His tanned cheeks flushed. "Ah, Harry!" he murmured, with an exultant smile. "Harry——"

Footsteps were flying up the drive. He turned abruptly; listened. A moment later, through the window from the veranda, came a woman—exquisite, breathless.

"Harry!" he cried, seizing her hands.

"Yes"—she gave a tremulous little laugh—"I've come! You're surprised—you didn't expect me till to-night. But I found—*he* telephoned—that he'd to meet a man on business and dine at the club. So——"

"So you came now, you darling!" Louis kissed the slim hands excitedly, yet reverentially. "Come, sit down, tell me"—he led her over to the settle. "What explanation did you give—what did you say?"

"To Nash?" She sank down, still panting a little from her flight. "I said very well, that I'd meet him at the boat, as it would be

inconvenient for him to come back to the hotel for me after dinner. I said that I was tired, and should go directly to my cabin, so perhaps he'd better not try to see me till morning."

"Good!"

"It was a better plan than the one we'd arranged, wasn't it?" she asked anxiously. "He seemed to think it perfectly natural that I should want to go aboard and to bed early. He said, 'all right,' in his most casual manner."

Louis drew a sigh of relief. "I'm willing to confess now, I was worried," he said, watching ardently every movement of her lovely arms, as she took the pins out of her hat. "In the other plan there were possibilities of a hitch, and—I imagine Nash could be merciless."

She laid down her hat, and cupped her chin in her hands. "It will be hard on him, at first," she said gently, her lips drooping in an adorably distressed smile. When Hilary smiled

her eyelashes came together, in tantalising effort to shut out the misty blue beneath; and her nose wrinkled up like that of a perverse child, which she was.

Louis, more occupied with the eyelashes than with Nash (who was rather a good friend of his) said, "I suppose it will—be hard on him, at first; but"—with the comforting assurance of men's wider knowledge—"he'll get over it, after a while, and then he'll divorce you, and we'll be married, and everything will be heavenly."

She bobbed her head, joyously. "Yes, won't it? And"—the blue frock she smoothed might have been a pinafore, so wistfully naïve was the clear face above it—"meantime, Louis, I'm here! We're together, and——"

He caught her to him; kissed her, almost for the first time, with a fire that was worship as well. "I can't seem to say anything," he managed unsteadily, after a while. "It's too marvellously unbe-

lievable having you here. And your things——"

"They've gone. I had my maid give them to an outside porter—not the hotel one; and he took them to the dock—but the wrong dock of course, Lloyd's. To-morrow we'll send for them. And wasn't it lucky"—she gave one of her gurgling, childlike laughs—"Ninette was impertinent as though to order, this morning, and I could dismiss her with the best excuse in the world. She said Mrs. Widdimore was going to Yokohama, and would be glad to take her. I *was* relieved."

Pembroke, too, laughed triumphantly. "You see? The gods have joined hands with us!" he cried, forgetting the one detail in which the gods had frowned: his servant, Ping's illness. "Everything's with us," declared Louis, gazing deep into her eyes.

"Everything — ah, Louis," she moved free of his arms, to look about her, wondering, radiant — "we're together — alone," she whispered unevenly. "We're

together, and at last I'm going to be happy!"

A step crunched on the gravel outside. "Go into that other room, darling," Louis said swiftly. "Until after to-night, you know," with a reassuring smile, "it's best to be careful."

She gathered up her hat and gloves, and vanished.

The next moment a man came on to the veranda.

"Oh!—oh, hullo, Brent," called Pembroke, going to the door. "Glad to see you—come in."

"Thanks," said Brent, entering. "All alone?"

"Why, yes." The other man laughed, naturally. "Generally am, you know, except for Ping. To-day the wretched boy's ill," he added, his face clouding—"had to turn in, an hour ago. But sit down, we'll have something wet."

"H'm," said John Brent. "I came for

something lamentably dry." But he sat down.

"Oh, well," returned Louis pleasantly, "the afternoon's young—I dare say we've time for both. Have a cigarette while I dig out the ice." He pushed a silver box towards Brent, on his way from the room.

Brent looked after him. Unmitigated pleasure it was, to look at the splendid clean shoulders, set so finely on the tall body. When Louis disappeared in the direction of his ice-box, the older man was sorry. He had to think then of Louis' brain: a matter that he knew little about.

When his host came back, "Look here," he said—by profession he was a physician—"don't you want me to have a look at that boy of yours? I might, quite as well, tell you if there's anything seriously wrong."

"Thanks"—Louis set down a bowl of cracked ice—"awfully good of you, but I've already sent for a man. Sanders, the natives have him, you know. I won't bother you—

dare say Sanders'll be along soon. That right for you, doctor ? " Delicately, he was measuring old whiskey.

" Perfect." Brent took the drink, without looking at it. Although only of average height he was a man whose bold-cut features (above all, the remarkable forehead) under thick black hair, made him striking enough. " You didn't go to the paper-race ? " he suggested conversationally, now, to Louis.

" No." Louis' eyes, as he sat down, were on a door at the opposite end of the room. " You see, this beastly business of Ping——"

" I see. But you've been riding a good deal this Fall, I believe," Brent leaned a little forward to glance directly into the blue eyes, " with the Comers, haven't you ? "

Louis sipped his high-ball, almost indifferently. " Oh, yes—occasionally. Fact is, I haven't much time to give to it."

Brent's keen eyes narrowed slightly. " And to-night Mr. Comer is going away," he pursued.

"Yes—well, aren't both of them? Mrs. Comer too?"

"Is she?"

Pembroke lit a cigarette. "I have heard nothing to the contrary," said he, nonchalantly. "When I was there at tea yesterday, I heard Mrs. Comer tell Betty Fayerweather that they would sail for Manila on the *Monitor* to-night."

Brent pulled at the pipe he had substituted for his cigarette. Then he said, folding his brown right hand into a fist, "Come, Pembroke—cards down on the table! I know everything, so——"

"Dear me," Louis smiled, though the long fingers holding his glass were for an instant not quite steady, "the old hoax: 'all is discovered—fly.' Which 'everything' is this?"

"No good finessing," retorted Brent, impatiently. "I tell you, I know. Hilary Comer is coming here to you to-night, when her husband sails for Manila. Is it true?"

"But if you know," said Pembroke, always

smiling, "why ask me? My dear Brent, I should have thought that in the two years you've been out here, you'd have learned what importance to attach to Shanghai gossip—if it's that that's worrying you."

"As far as I know," Brent returned quietly, "there's been no gossip—certainly not this, thank God. I got my information from you and Hilary yourselves; and I've come here to——"

"My dear doctor"—the blue eyes, fixed intently on that door beyond, glittered—"supposing your extraordinary hypothesis to be true, I should think this quite the last place to which you'd come!"

"Possibly. You don't know preceding circumstances. Let me sketch them for you." Brent now was sitting erect, his probing eyes on the other's face. Louis smoked on, negligently, with an expression of amused half-interest.

"When I was a student in Vienna," Brent began rapidly, "I met Hilary Temple—you

didn't know that"—as Louis, involuntarily, started—"you thought we met here for the first time. No, I met Hilary in the *salon* of a students' *pension*; she was in the second year of her work with Leschetizky, already his prize pupil. I was completing my psycho-neurosis course. We saw each other daily—we went walks. At the end of six months we decided to take a flat together."

Pembroke tore to his feet with an exclamation. "You——"

"Sit down," said Brent, curtly. "I never had any faith in marriage—never wanted to get married. Neither, she said, did she. Between us, we found we had money enough to run a home on that basis."

Louis now was sitting perfectly still. Where his hands clutched the chair-arms, the knuckles showed white.

"We never did it," Brent concluded, in his same concise tones. "She went to London to give her first concert; and when she came back—we were to have moved into the flat

next day—she told me she was going to marry Comer."

"Ah!" breathed Louis.

"Yes. But the point is this: after giving various and vague reasons for her change of mind, she unconsciously came down to the real one. She said, 'when I thought about it (that was of living with me) it seemed all right, but when it came to doing it, I *couldn't*.' Pembroke, the whole philosophy of the woman who wants to be unconventional and can't, lies right there."

"Indeed!" said Pembroke, his poise returning by comforting bounds.

"Yes. Hilary wants to think—and to act—for herself; but herself will act in only one way."

"In that case," demanded Louis, coolly, "why should she be coming here to me, as you say?"

"Because you've kept her impulse to the sticking-point, and because she trusts you, and is very much bored with her husband.

She wouldn't stay with you two weeks. And then what? Pembroke, this must be prevented! I intend to see that it's prevented."

"Oh, do you!" cried Pembroke, losing his temper then, and with it his caution. "And who are you in all this—eh? Hilary's never mentioned your name to me—except as the most casual acquaintance. What's your game? Coming and preaching to me, when you've done what you jolly well pleased yourself—or tried to. Do you think I wouldn't marry Hilary this minute if I could? *I'm* not trying to get something for nothing. I'm not asking a woman whom I'm perfectly free to marry, and she to marry me, to be my mistress. Pah! You and your hypocrisies make me sick. Tak'em where they'll do some good; tak'em to——"

"Hilary's husband, for instance," suggested that individual, appearing within the square of open door. "You should modulate your voices, my little friends—I heard you

from the drive, where I was tying my horse. Comin' in, may I ? "

Louis turned a shade paler than he was before. " Certainly," he said with an effort. " Er—please come in, Nash."

" I've no revolvers concealed about me," volunteered the rather small man in riding clothes, who entered then ; " not even a very nasty spite." He stood before the other two men, looking at them as though he quite enjoyed it. " Curiosity's all I bring, and I'll take it away again pretty soon—ship sails at midnight, you know. So be kind to me, boys —tell me all about it."

Brent met the cynical brown eyes with an awakened interest in his own. " How much did you hear ? " he asked directly.

Comer swept him with what might have been an approving glance, but ended in a scowl. " I heard that Louis here would marry my wife—when I've divorced her, I suppose ! —and that you, when you wanted her, didn't

think it worth the trouble. Was there anything more ? "

" Only reasons," said Brent reflectively, " which may not interest you."

" I think, doctor," said Louis, with some ceremony, " Nash and I can better settle this alone now." From where he stood beside Nash he could still see that closed door at the other end of the room. He moistened his lips.

" Not at all—not at all," protested Nash Comer, sitting down to cross his short brown legs, and to pass his hand over his leathery brown face. " Nothing's so much of a crowd as two, y'know—under some circumstances."

" Then," began Brent—but Comer stopped him.

" Wait a minute." Through the window he faced he had caught sight of something. " I'm not for shouting my affairs to the rest of Shanghai, like you two. Who's this coming up the drive ? "

Louis looked out. "Why, it's Sanders, come to see my servant. Excuse me—I'll show him Ping's digs."

"Humph!—seems kind o' glad to stretch his legs, don't he?" Comer, watching him hurry away, drawled to Brent. "Damn good to look at," he had to confess, laconically.

"But short-sighted. I came," said Brent, "to try to give him the benefit of my experience."

"Then you haven't had much," said Nash Comer, gnawing the ragged moustache that covered his upper lip. He wheeled round in his chair, and the eyes of the two men met; in a long, steady gaze. "So it was you, back there in Vienna," Comer said finally; "well—not that I owe you any bouquets—I never should have picked you for the man."

"She told you, then?" said Brent tersely.

"Oh, she told me! About you and your 'philosophy of freedom,' and—but I'd hardly have looked to find you in Shanghai. She didn't say your name, nor she never gave any

sign when we met you here. For m'self," he continued, succinctly, "I should have sized you, Brent, for somethin' a bit bigger than—a philosopher."

"Thank you," said Brent.

"You needn't. I may thank you, I suppose, for having kept away and minded your own affairs, after she'd seen you again here."

"Oh"—Brent smiled, from under his arresting black brows—"I'm not in love with Hilary now, you know."

"Then what are you here for?" shot out her husband. "Why should you care if——?"

"I am a philosopher," Brent reminded calmly; "as such, I put the brakes on calamity when I can. I am also a physician, a neurologist: when certain evidence falls into my hands, I use it—to break down hallucination."

"Well, I'm damned!" declared Comer under his breath. "A philosopher—a—a neurol—well, I'm damned! And you expect me to believe,"—he gave a short laugh—

"that you came here this afternoon for the purpose of rearrangin' a game in which you personally hadn't the interest of a soumarkee?"

"Oh, no," smiled the doctor, "I don't expect you to believe it. I only say it's true."

A peculiar whistle came from behind the ragged moustache—whether of mockery or sheer wonderment, one could not tell. "Say," Comer's slow voice came rather sharper than before, "d'you 'mind tellin' me how you happened to know there was anything to come for? Where'd you hear——"

"Don't worry on that score. So far as I know, there's not been a whisper. I got my information from Hilary and Pembroke themselves."

"What?" Comer sprang to his feet.

"Oh, not the way you mean. Sit down, and I'll tell you, since Pembroke doesn't seem to be returning." As Comer flung himself into a chair again, the physician leaned forward, his face lit with a new gleam.

"You see, yesterday, at Mrs. Fayerweather's I met both Hilary and Pembroke. I've seen very little of either of them, for as you may know, I've scarcely any time for society; but yesterday, I dropped in at the Fayerweathers' for tea, and in half an hour they'd given me the history probably of months."

"Humph!" Comer's brown face was a question-mark. "How?"

"Hilary—who when she's met me before, has always been quite natural—that is, formal of course, called to me to come and sit by her; made room on a sofa—was charmingly intimate, you see. We talked together for as much as fifteen minutes, and twice during that time, she called me Louis—without even realising it, afterwards."

"Well? What of that?" bolted Comer.

"She also," proceeded Brent deliberately, "gave me her scarf and gloves to hold, and forgot later to come and get them. Pembroke pieced out the story by asking me to look in at the *Monitor*, meaning the Mercantile, to see

one of the stewards who's been having bad nervous attacks, and said he'd meet me there at ten o'clock on Friday. Then he instantly added, 'Friday morning, of course.' That was the last link, for the Mercantile isn't open in the evening, and the *Monitor*, your ship, sails at midnight. The whole thing was perfectly clear."

"Was it?" said Comer ironically. "Well, I'm—blessed if I see how."

"Certainly!" Brent sat forward eagerly. "Hilary is unprecedentedly nice to me—with whom," he reminded the other man bluntly, "she once intended to live. But she explains this by calling me by Pembroke's name—the association is entirely simple; and she shows furthermore, by unconscious two-fold forgetfulness, her desire to leave her belongings with me—that is with Pembroke, again. He, on his part, furnishes me with the hour uppermost in his mind—states it, immediately, on the mention of an appointment, and relates it to your ship: the whole plan is before me."

"Humph!" was all Comer said—but with a certain grudging capitulation. Adding in a different tone, "so you came to prevent 'em. You may think I did, too: I didn't. It's for Hal to mix the medicine. I'll swallow it," he said, grimly, looking up at Louis as the latter came towards them from his dining-room.

"Sorry I was so long," said Louis constrainedly. "The doctor kept me, asking me a confounded rigmarole of questions. He'll be out soon, and then I'll know how long this bother is to last. Well?" glancing awkwardly from one to the other of the two men, as he sat down, "I suppose you've talked things over?"

"We've talked 'em over *some*," said Comer, shifting his cigar from one side of his square mouth to the other. "Fact is, Louis, I only came to pay a little friendly call, m'self. Wanted you to know I hadn't been quite the granny tucked up with her knitting, that you seemed to think——"

"I'm sure;" began Louis, crimsoning.

"That I hadn't been growin' cataracts this last year," continued Comer levelly, "nor investin' in ear-trumpets, nor anything like that. Maybe false pride," said Hilary's husband, tugging at the raggedest corner of his moustache, "but I felt I had to clear myself with you to that extent—of being a *too*-fool, y'know."

"I'm sure," repeated Louis confusedly, "I never thought——"

"Oh yes, you did! Ye-es, you did. But no matter. All I want to say to you is this: I'm not. I know exactly how things stand; I've known all along. And while it's Hal who's dealin' this hand, I'm behind her—d'you see? And I don't do any divorcin'," he said slowly, "not yet awhile."

Louis sprang to his feet with an exclamation.

"No." Comer rose too; strode over to stand within two inches of the other man, straining his short body to peer up at him. "She can throw the Decalogue under her feet and dance on it, that's her business. My

business is to see to it that when she's snubbed God, and man has snubbed her, she shall have a place to go to. I'm attendin' to *that*, understand ? "

Louis' handsome face was livid. But for some reason he remained silent.

" And now I'm going," Comer concluded. " My horse'll be getting restless, and—I think, gentlemen " (with a formality that sat strangely on him) " there is nothing further we need say to each other ? "

Brent, also rising, took his hand—extended with a frankness wholly matter-of-fact. " I wish you weren't going away," said Brent, earnestly, " I'd like to know you better."

Comer grinned. " That's because I've just been impressive. You'd find me devilish dull when it came to philosophy."

He turned to Louis. " Goodbye, son," he said steadily, " you're lettin' yourself in for a damn big portion of remorse. I don't envy you."

" I—goodbye," said Louis, darkly ; at the

same time, limitless relief came into his eyes constantly fixed on that closed door. "And you, doctor—you're going too?" he turned quickly to Brent. "No, there's no reason why we should say any more to each other—why we should ever see each other again, I think! I——"

"Stop!" Came an order like a pistol-shot—to the two men about to pass out of the door. "No one leaves here. There is cholera in this house. You are in quarantine."

II

EVEN in modern existence—of which the plaint is that "life is so complex"—there may be found occasionally a nature to whom life is astonishingly simple, to whom black is quite black, and white completely white; and the inchoate greys that bother other people, as obscure as limbo. Such a person was Hilary Comer.

Action presented itself to Hilary in one of two forms: to be done, or that had been done. Conditional verbs were left unincorporated in Hilary's education. To be sure, there were negatives, but these she was wont to juggle quickly into the positive of other terms. She prayed with far greater interest for the things she had done than for those she ought to have done—which quickly lost identity with the vivid, and so to Hilary became null. In a

world of groping, care-worn creatures, fearfully feeling their way, she walked along as fresh and ingenuously confident as a child of six; regarding the edge of the abyss or the mild sweep of green meadows, as she chanced to stumble upon them, with the same round, unafraid eyes, and, with the child's charmed fate, repeatedly escaping destruction.

Her mother died when she was born, and her father—an erratic, of magnificent good-looks and several important inventions—killed himself in his laboratory, experimenting with nitro-glycerine, just before Hilary's twentieth birthday. She grieved for him passionately, though briefly; and rejecting an offer of a home with his sister, went off with a school friend to Vienna—to study her beloved piano.

For two years she drifted—say more accurately, darted—from one group to another, of the diffuse colony of students. Her father had left her a modest income, and she was not extravagant. Her chief danger lay in her

beauty—of a remarkable and rare type, and her genius—soon discovered by eager teachers, weary in the service of mere talent. The opportunities and privileges opened by her finally coming under the tuition of the Master himself, were at once brilliant and menacing. There was the creed of the divine right of genius : to do as it pleases, and be pardoned—anything ; near-geniuses lost no time in teaching it to her, or trying to. Hilary accepted the creed, cheerfully, and forgot all about it. She had one of her own (though unconscious) which was far simpler : the divine right of the individual. But she had too, the saving guard of a delicate discrimination ; that something the French call *fin*, and which stood between her and the muddy morass of "artistic" foibles and fantasies, like a white-flaming sword.

When John Brent met her, her grey eyes were as direct and mistily innocent as though she had been twelve instead of twenty-two ; and they had still that directness, half a year

later, when she said goodbye to him; though knowledge filled them in the place of innocence. A shade of bitterness, too, perhaps; but it had vanished, when he came upon her again in a Shanghai drawing-room. She was the serene married woman, calmly superior to her beauty, and ready to weave with him a pleasant fabric of the casual to enfold them, where the tight woof of the personal had been. By tacit consent, they began afresh: as "Mrs. Comer," and "Dr. Brent"; their one sensitiveness to the past, their entire ignoring of it.

Probably Brent was the only person who knew them, who did not find the marriage of Hilary and Nash Comer extraordinary. From the woman's point of view, of course, Nash, nor any man, would have been thought extraordinary, to want to marry Hilary. But for a creature such as she—"half fairy, half flower," all mystery—to yoke with this veritable son of the soil, and to whom the soil would always cling: homely, ineradicable,

no matter how honest: it was a standing enigma to the superficialists.

To Brent, it had been from the first, quite explicable. Hilary was far too much a woman ever to become wholly an artist. Brent was not in the least surprised when she abandoned the concert tour her manager had arranged, to get married. Even though the decision came on the heels of her triumph in London. In their talk during her temporary return to Vienna, she showed that she was sore and bruised from the years of vaunted "independence," and yearned for coddling. Nash Comer happened along, at precisely the psychological moment, to offer it to her; and she accepted him, as simply as she had accepted Brent's proposal before that—and out of as utter an ignorance.

Now, at the end of four years—during which she had roamed a large part of the world with her husband, in the interests of his tea business, and grown inured to the luxury of his brusque adoration—she was leaving him; her tranquil

selfishness so completely unconscious as to be almost sublime. She loved Louis, Louis loved her. She did not love Nash, she knew now that she never had. Therefore the thing to do was to leave Nash and to go to Louis: it was as clear to Hilary as the writing on the wall. She would have told Nash all about it, only Louis said that she had better not. He said Nash would be sure to interfere, and that it was best to say nothing at all—to anybody—until everything was arranged, and it was too late for interference. So she had followed Louis' suggestions, learning thereby for the first time the principles of caution—and deception; and she now sat, on the afternoon of the day Nash was to sail, in Louis' bedroom—wondering if those men who had come to see him would never go.

She divined, from the varying rumble of voices, that there were now two, and that Louis was having trouble in getting rid of them. After to-morrow, she thought gladly, this affair of concealment would be over; Nash would

have gone, people would know that she had stayed—and with Louis. It would all be perfectly open and above board: Louis said most people would cut them—the sooner the better, she returned, undisturbed. They would know who their real friends were, and they were all who mattered, anyhow.

She wandered into the corridor, to the living-room door, and listened. The voices sounded rather excited; as though—a pucker came into her smooth forehead. But after all, she could tell nothing, the sounds were so muffled. She started to go back and wait, when another door—slightly open—attracted her notice. She pushed it ajar—it was fun to go exploring in Louis' house—and looked in. A large room, done all in white: dressing-table, chairs, curtains, rugs; and the big, posted bed draped within its alcove. The pure peace of it awed Hilary, before she realised what the room meant. Then—as she entered hesitatingly, she caught sight of the one bit of colour in the place: red roses, a great vase of

them on a low tabouret—like a splotch of warm heart's-blood upon snow. And she uttered a little cry, and rushed to them; and fell on her knees and kissed their petals.

At that moment Brent, in the living-room, was saying, "It's cholera, all right. I put Sanders through a stiff cross-examination, and it seems there's not the shadow of a doubt."

Louis, who had been waiting, speechless, while the two doctors conferred on the veranda, turned on his heel and strode out of the house.

Nash Comer looked after him, silently. Then he looked at Brent. "Kind o' rough on him," he said, an odd expression in his weather-beaten face.

"Rough?" cried Brent. "Do you know I've two auto-suggestion patients just at the point where they're beginning to dream what I want 'em to? And I must drop them for days—I should say it is rough!"

Comer, who was standing by the door, gazing out into the dusk, looked round at him with a peculiar smile. "How long does this

Sanders count on keeping us penned up here ? " he asked abruptly.

" Can't tell. Has to see the health officials." Brent was pacing irritably up and down the long room. " He's all upset because the port was given a clean bill of health a week ago—thought the cholera was entirely cleared out, and now——"

" Now it's begin over again," muttered the short man by the door, hands thrust deep in his pockets. " Everybody—begin over again."

" Eh ? " said Brent sharply.

" Nothin'. I was just talkin' to m'self."

" H'm "—Brent pulled up short—" hadn't you better telephone Mrs. Comer ? "

" Well," said Nash drily, " I hadn't exactly forgotten it. But I thought perhaps Louis—guess I'll wait a bit," he concluded, briefly, sitting down to light a cigar. " Gad, but it's dark in this room—wonder where Louis has his switch ? "

" He'll be back presently," Brent surmised,

beginning to pace again. "Wish he'd hurry—we've got to talk over things."

"Oh . . . fumigating precautions, I suppose, and all that?"

"Yes. I say, did you drink anything?"

"No," said Nash, between puffs, "Did you?"

"Yes—worse luck, whisky and soda. The danger lies with things the boy has handled—you can bet your last cash, the whiskey's one! Sanders'll send us out a lot of new stuff, and the nurse will disinfect everything when he comes. That's the best that can be done now," said Brent thoughtfully.

"Humph! Thought they didn't quarantine for cholera," suggested Comer after a moment.

"Don't, in most places. Sometimes they don't here. But the epidemic this year has been terrific—the worst in the last twenty—and the consuls have instructed the Health Board to take extraordinary methods."

Comer glanced at him through the darkening

light, searchingly. "Is there much danger —for us? Real danger, I mean?"

Brent threw himself down in a chair. "Absolutely problematical," he said, tersely. "Of course Pembroke's been directly exposed, he runs the greatest chance. And we through him—anyhow," he broke off (just as a door at the other end of the room opened noiselessly) "it's a miraculous piece of luck that it's we who are here, and not Hilary."

Nash answered something inarticulate. Adding, the next moment, "Confound Louis, why don't he come back? Somebody's got to break this news to Hal, and break it quick. Or——"

"What news?" asked Hilary, coming swiftly across the room. "What do you mean? Where is Louis? What news?"

Brent jumped to his feet, with an exclamation.

"Why—hello, Hal," said Nash gently—though what colour there was in his brown face had left it.

"I'm here, I've been here all the time," she said, meeting his eyes directly, through the dusk. "I'm going to stay here. Now you can tell me the news."

Nash drew a chair towards her. "I'm afraid you are going to stay here, Hal," he said, with a crooked smile. "The fact is—we all are."

She looked at him, and from him to Brent, who stood by, dumb. "You—and John" (she used the name quite unconsciously)—are going to stay here?" she repeated. "Nash! What do you mean?"

The outline of her face, against the cloudy dark hair, was suddenly sharp. One of the long, fine hands went out to clutch the back of the chair. "Are you serious?" she added, with a shaky laugh, "or is it just a cruel joke?"

Nash quietly put her into the chair, before he answered. Then he said, without looking at her, "I'm afraid it isn't a joke, Hal. You see Louis' boy—there's a bit of a complication.

Louis' boy is ill, and—the doctor's afraid we'll all have to be quarantined here for a while."

The living-room was almost dark, but Brent (who assured himself that he was merely an onlooker) saw Hilary's face slowly whiten. "You say"—she was staring up at her husband—"that we—we *all* shall have to be quarantined? Then" (with a burst of violence) "where is Louis? How long have you known this? Why didn't he tell me? No, I can't believe it!"

"There," said Nash soothingly, though he jerked out his handkerchief to wipe his damp forehead, "it's been only half an hour. The doctor just left. And I guess Louis—I guess he felt too bad."

Hilary was twisting her long fingers in and out perhaps in effort to hide their trembling. "Quarantined," she murmured, dazedly: "you and John and—oh, it's horrible! Don't you see how grotesque—but of course you don't"—looking from her husband to the keen, strong face of Brent—"for you never knew.

Perhaps you know now. Perhaps that's why" —she bowed her head, and laid it against her locked hands, shivering.

The two men, standing above her, avoided each other's eyes. Then Brent, with a sudden return to what he called sanity, laid his hand on her shoulder, and said authoritatively, "Come, Hilary—you're hysterical—absurd! Sit up. Stop crying. There's a great deal to do."

Nash turned on him, furiously. But Hilary sat up at once. "You're right," she said, in a perfectly even voice, "I'm being a baby. But I wasn't crying," ingenuously, "I was only—thinking."

"Well"—Brent smothered a smile that of itself had been rather an uncertain smile—"think of the practical necessities of the situation: we're here for some days; you'll want to telephone for things. Unless——" he stopped abruptly.

The warm colour swept her cheek. "I have nothing. My trunks are at the dock—

the North German Lloyd dock," she added, a little defiantly, to Nash.

"I'll call 'em up," was all he said; "and the hotel. I suppose you'll want to talk to your maid?"

"I let her go," said Hilary, simply. "You'd better not have the trunks sent here, Nash—only the valises. They're still at the hotel, and I suppose everything will be ruined by disinfecting—oh," she broke off passionately, springing up, "how can one talk about these things—think of them, when—where *is* Louis?"

Brent moved towards the door. "I'll find him, and send him to you. Comer—if you care for a turn on the drive, later——"

Nash nodded. "Join you presently," he muttered, as the other man went out.

Hilary sank into a chair. "How did you—and he—happen to come out here to-day?" she asked, numbly.

"Me?" said Nash, balancing his short legs against a table, and speaking with a curious

lightness. "I just came to pay a goodbye call on Louis. Found Brent here—you'll have to ask him what he came for."

"You didn't know——"

"That you were here?" The man's eyes continued to avoid her face. "No, Hal, I didn't."

"You came just by chance? Not because you'd suspected——"

"Well," he said slowly, "I can't say I was much surprised when—look here—" he strode away from her swiftly—"I've got to telephone for those bags."

"You won't talk about it"—her eyes followed him, as he went over to the desk where the telephone was. "I wanted to tell you long ago, but Louis——"

Nash took down the receiver. "I'm going to tell them to hold our room," he said, clearing his throat, which sounded hoarse. "It'll silence any comment that might be made—on our being found out here this last day, together."

"Yes," said she lifelessly.

He gave the number. "Afterwards—when the quarantine is lifted," he continued, levelly, "you will of course carry out your arrangements as you choose."

"Nash!" she cried suddenly, rising to go over to him.

But Nash was talking into the transmitter. And it happened that as Louis came in, wild and dishevelled from the fog outside, he found Hilary with her hand on her husband's arm; and heard Nash say: "Mr. and Mrs. Comer, d'you understand? Mr. and Mrs. Comer are in quarantine at Mr. Pembroke's, but you are *to hold their rooms.*"

Louis staggered into a seat.

"Oh, and send out our bags, will you? Yes, leave them at the gate. Oh, thanks I guess it's nothin' serious—I guess you'll see us back in a few days. G'bye."

Nash hung up the receiver, and turned round. Hilary, also—to give a sharp little cry.

"Hullo, Louis," said Nash, quietly, "you

back again? Lord—I forgot to tell 'em to send for my horse."

He turned once more to the desk. And the eyes of the two, Louis and Hilary, met; through the shadows, in silent, sickening misery.

When he rose from the 'phone a moment later, "guess I'll go down to the gate and see what's happened to Prika," Nash said, with a disjointed laugh. "Left her there, like the coyote I am, since four o'clock—no blanket or anything. Oh—er," at the door he looked back for a moment, "so long," he said, "till dinner."

III

DINNER was over. What had been eaten, and what said, Brent alone of the four could have told. And even he forgot whether he had answered Hilary that the quarantine would probably be for three days or for ten. Louis had prepared the meal, Brent and Nash had washed the dishes. The three with Hilary, now sat together in the lamp-lit living-room; unrootable silence making an obdurate and graceless fifth.

Hilary's dark head was tilted against one wing of her big chair; her eyes, from their screening lashes, looked out half shut, brooding. Louis was much occupied with the fire. Brent read—a volume of verse he had picked up from the table; and Nash puffed at his inseparable cigar. Ten minutes went by.

"What time'd that Sanders say the nurse

was coming?" Nash asked, of nobody in particular; but Brent answered,

"Nine o'clock. He ought to be here in half an hour."

"Native, of course?"

"Of course."

Silence pushed her chair forward creakingly. Again Nash defied her. "He's bringin' some stuff for you, isn't he, doc.?" (The fraternal intimacies of the dish-washing had brought forth "Comer" and "doc.")

"Yes. My microscope, and a box of slides, and some German magazines."

"German magazines!" Nash ejaculated. "Oh Lord!"

Louis laughed constrainedly. Hilary gave an absent smile. Silence frowned blightingly; and for another ten minutes put her heaviest foot forward.

Then Louis said, hesitatingly, "oh, er—about the rooms."

Brent looked up from his book. Neither Hilary nor Nash knew where they looked.

"I thought it would be most convenient if you and Brent (to Nash) took the sleeping-porch. That will leave my room for Mrs. Comer," Louis said, colourlessly, "and I'll bunk out here. Sorry things are so cramped, but you see this is a bachelor's bungalow."

"Nonsense," said Brent crisply. "We'll have miles of room."

"You fix it just exactly to suit yourself, Louis," muttered Nash.

And Hilary said nothing. Only to herself, she thought exultantly, "he doesn't intend to use the white room. He doesn't intend to use it—yet!"

When Louis took Nash out to show him the sleeping-porch, she had her first words alone with Brent. "I didn't know you knew Louis so well," she began, directly the other two had left them.

Brent closed his book. "I know him better since five hours ago," he said.

"I mean—I didn't know you came to see him."

"What you really mean," Brent returned calmly, "is that you *want* to know *why* I came to see him. Evidently he didn't tell you."

Her hands clasped together, tightly. "He told me that—that you just dropped in for a chat. Was there——"

Brent grunted contemptuously. "Of course! It takes a man who says he loves a woman to insult her intelligence with milk and water lies. He calls it 'trying to spare her'—oh, good Lord!"

Hilary started; stiffened. "Then there was something more! Yes, there must have been, since you know that he—that I——"

"That you think you're in love with each other?" Brent finished bluntly. "Certainly there was more in my coming to see Pembroke," he added, "than the mere desire for a chat. If neither he nor your husband will tell you, I'll tell you: I came, on this particular day, to tell Pembroke *our* experience."

The blood rushed into her face. "*Our*—your and my—you had no right," she declared

hotly. "It was my experience as well as yours—you had no right."

"I took the right," said he grimly—admitting to himself, as he watched the colour sweep from her brow to the long throat, that she was more beautiful as a woman than she had been as a girl. "For that matter," he added, thinking of Nash, "I don't see that any rights were being considered."

"I tried to tell Louis"—she was pursuing her own agitated train of thought—"he wouldn't let me. He said it didn't matter."

"To a man in love," said Brent drily, "nothing matters, unless it's *happened*. You don't find that it's mattered to him, now, do you?"

"No, but—then Nash knows too?" she broke off.

"Of course he does! He came when Pembroke and I were in the midst of our fight. You'd told him, though."

"Yes. Everything, except that it was you. I'd have told him that, if I had thought I'd

ever see you again." She was leaning forward on the arms of her chair, and gazing at him strangely.

"You never did see me again, really," he said, with his keen smile, "until this afternoon. And now you've fallen directly into your old habit—of being afraid of me."

Her own smile was frank, though a bit unsteady. "I'm afraid of your brain—it's beaten me so many times."

"There was one time when it didn't," he reminded.

"And of course," she went on quickly, "psychologically the situation must be *most interesting*."

The flash of irony interested him. "Though to tell the truth," he said, "I've not thought much about it psychologically, since this afternoon."

"But you will. You came"—she looked straight into his eyes—"to treat 'an emotional complex,' and you'll go on treating it. You see, I know you still. But John (again

the name came with perfect naturalness), "remember, while you're experimenting—the weapons aren't equal. The rest of us fight with our hearts. And—be sure you can give us something, before you take something away: that's what you are apt to forget."

He met her steady look amazedly. Had the child Hilary actually grown up—into an analyst? He was the more puzzled when Louis and Nash returned, and she said to them, with quite a child's hurt simplicity: "You might have told me—about John. I think glossed-over truths are stupid."

They looked away from her, half sheepishly. And then the nurse arrived, cutting short what might have been an awkward five minutes. The three men went with him to the place between the bungalow and the sick servant's quarters, where they had drawn a broad chalk line. It was understood that from neither side was that line to be approached nearer than by a distance of four feet. From the patient's point of view this was quite practicable, since

Ping had of course his own kitchen and wash-room apart from his master's house. The passage that led to them being all of a hundred feet long, he was isolated; yet the nurse would have no difficulty of communication with the bungalow at any time.

Until now the fact of the cholera had seemed almost negligible; blurred, at least, in the maze of intricacies it involved. But when the three Europeans stood on one side of the significant Line, while the nurse, with a quiet good-night, crossed to the other side——

"Say," said Nash under his breath, "it gives a man a darned queer feelin'!"

"Rather." Louis vouchsafed his first friendly word.

"But he's as perky as a May morning. It takes a Chinaman to go into a pest-house as though 'twas a Christian Science church!"

They went back to the living-room in silence, but the sharpest antagonism had lost its edge. And soon Nash, having been to the gate to fetch the valises left there, announced that he

" was for turning in." Brent seconded him, shouldering his own satchel that the nurse had brought. There was a constrained round of " good-nights."

Then Louis fell on his knees beside Hilary, and hid his face in her lap.

" My dear," she crooned, stroking his hair, " my dear ! "

" It's no use," he murmured, unevenly; " I'm hit, and I've got to cry ! That those two should be here to-night—*to-night*—ah, Harry, Harry ! "

His lips were on her cool hand. " I know," she whispered. " Oh, I know ! "

" I adore you ! I "—he straightened then, to look at her bitterly. " *They* think I only want you; but, Harry, you know. You know I've scarcely touched you—all the times we've been alone together. Until to-day I've never kissed you—only that once when I found you crying, and then I lost my head, that's all. But I fought this thing for months, I didn't open my mouth until——"

"Louis, Louis"—she leaned toward him yearningly—"don't! Do you think I want you to apologise for loving me?"

"No, but—oh, I suppose it's Brent." He got up, to stand erect in his splendid good looks. "He had the insolence to imply——"

Hilary interrupted quickly. "I tried to tell you all about that once, but you cut me short. If only you'd listened then, he couldn't have hurt you as he did to-day."

Louis caught her up to him, half savagely. "What I couldn't bear was his drawing a parallel—between your love for me, and—and what you felt for him. I couldn't bear it! You might have cared for him—but the arrangement you made—to go to him, though he was free to marry you; that he was able to compare it with your coming to me now—! He made it all so horribly *cheap*."

Hilary looked thoughtful. "It wasn't cheap," she said, her grey eyes cloudy in retrospection, "what I had with John, I mean. I believed he loved me. He did not; he loved

only an idea, of completion, that he had. But I didn't know that. And I was very tired of living to myself; but the other men I had known were so—well, I preferred my loneliness."

Louis' arms about her tightened. "My sweetheart!" he said.

"John was different. He seemed to surround one with fresh air. He told me quite frankly that marriage was out of his scheme of things, and to me, too, it seemed a handicap; I was preparing for the concert-stage, you know. And so we decided——"

"But you couldn't carry it out!" he broke in triumphantly. "When the time came—you couldn't have loved him, after all, or——"

"I don't know," she said slowly; "something—held me back. I couldn't do it. And then there was Nash. Nash loved me; John only understood me—like another specimen under his microscope. So I married Nash; for there was always the loneliness, you see. And he has been very good."

"Oh, yes," said Louis, restively, "Nash is a good fellow. I've always liked him. But Harry, the thought of him as your husband, in your adorable dainty sitting-room, in your ——" he checked himself violently. "I can't," he cried, pushing her from him, to sink into a chair. "This afternoon, when he said he'd not divorce you, I—I saw red."

"And what if he doesn't divorce me?" Hilary threw back her head. "When this quarantine's lifted, he'll have to go away; and he knows now that I love you. We'll be alone together finally as we'd planned, and, oh, Louis," she crept into his arms, whispering, "I've seen the white room—and the roses—we'll never let them fade!"

"My lovely one!" At the touch of her soft, yielding body, Louis forgot Nash and everything else. "Darling, you're right," he said against her lips, "it's only postponement, all this. And at least you're here in my house, in my arms. At least I can——

"Mrs. Comer," called a voice from the wall,

" will you see if your husband's slippers are in your valise ? He can't find them, and he thinks the maid may have put them in your bag by mistake."

The door into the hall was shut ; but Hilary jumped up, cheeks burning. " Yes, certainly " —she answered in what she believed to be a composed tone of voice—" I'll look at once."

And with a backward glance at Louis (laying her finger on her lips, for he was furious) she opened the door, and joined Brent.

" Here they are "—a few moments later she came to him again from her room. " Ninette did get them mixed, careless girl."

Brent took the stumpy slippers, and looked down at them. " I imagine such things are always happening to husbands and wives," he said reflectively. Then, smiling at her, " You're going to bed ? Good-night."

And as he waited, hand on her door to close it for her, " Good-night, John," she said, of necessity. " I appreciate the motive that led you to come here to-day——"

"But you think I'm an interfering idiot?" he flashed, still smiling. "It's the thing I do best, Hilary. My own affairs I've made a hash of; but when it comes to minding other people's, I'm almost brilliant."

And swinging the slippers, he closed her door gently, and went down the hall. Not to the sleeping-porch, however, but in the other direction—to the living-room.

"Mrs. Comer's gone to bed," he told Louis casually. "She seems tired, and——"

"Why don't you say what you mean?" demanded Louis, leaping up, with fight in his eye. "You were courageous enough this afternoon—why not now? Why don't you say you ordered her to bed? Why don't you say you locked her in? Why don't you——"

"Because I didn't," said Brent tranquilly—at the same time admiring the superb, savage ardour of the creature, as he stood there magnificent in his youth—panting a little. "Not any of those things. I simply asked her for her husband's slippers."

And continuing to swing them by their battered heels, he sauntered back to the sleeping-porch.

Louis ground his teeth, and sat down again. He would wait half an hour: it was ten now. If by half after ten she had not come back—this Brent indeed! To whom Hilary, and all of them no doubt, were so many "slides under his microscope." Louis told himself darkly that it was possible for the microscope itself to be smashed; that it certainly would be, unless the fellow curbed his confounded impertinence. He doubled up his splendid muscles, longingly; he was actually thirsty to have a go at Brent.

At quarter to eleven he was still alone, so he got up drearily and made his bed—of the broad couch by the window—and threw himself down on it. The thought of sleep made him laugh, but his head ached, and he was more comfortable lying down. The fire still burned, and he lay there watching its violet tongues, and thinking of that intoxicating moment,

with Hilary in his arms. There had been so much to tell her in the afternoon, before dinner; no chance for anything but bitter explanation. But to-night——! He saw the soft oval of her face on his breast—half hidden in its mists of dark hair; the fluttering lashes of the sweet closed eyes, the long throat with its vibrant pulse; and her mouth——

He lay so still that he could hear his own heart beat; yet he did not hear the door from the hall open, almost noiselessly. Rather, when with a strange sense of being companioned, he looked up—he was sure he beheld a vision: exquisitely slender, wonderfully sweet. Motionless in the door she stood, and the fire lit delicately the white dressing-gown, and the two long braids over her shoulders; braids that ended in curls, like a baby's hair. And her smile—it was that that made him catch his breath. He gazed and gazed, unbelievingly. And then, still from the door, "Good-night," she said softly; and vanished.

In her own room (his room), she lay in bed

and sobbed quietly. "I couldn't have borne it," she murmured over and over to herself, "I couldn't quite have borne it without that good-night; in spite of John. John! Yes it *is* grotesque. And Nash——!"

Nash at that moment was lying blinking up into the murky sky, and talking within himself to some one. "You, whoever y'are," he challenged the dimness, "*You* mussed up this game. Now You give the new deal time! I was ready to play it the other way—You know I was. I had my teeth all set. But You wouldn't have it so. You juggled the cards: now You play fair. Give this new deal time!"

"Did you say something?" asked Brent from out the dark.

"Nope," said Nash. "'Night, Doc."

"'Night," said Brent.

Quiet settled down over the bungalow. Only, at the end of a long hour, a man's tall form stole along the corridor; into a room that was still and white. And once within,

found the great bed, fell on his knees beside it. The heavy fragrance of red roses came to him, but he buried his face in the cool coverlid, wound his arms up round the soft pillows. And at last the warm tears trickled through his hands; and somehow he was comforted. He could feel Hilary's hands on his head, even her lips; heavenly gentle. And then her tears too (had they not rained down her face till she slept, exhausted?) mingling with his, to consecrate that high-draped, empty bed.

Louis knelt there a long time. When at last he left, and crept back to his bunk, it was with a sort of peace in his numb heart. But he locked the door of the white room, and the roses inside; and hid the key. There are chambers in a man's experience where he dare not trust even himself.

IV

RAIN: garrulous grey streams of it, clattering persistently upon the roof; dripping, dripping, ceaselessly, through the gaunt trees. The four, who were gathered round Louis' breakfast-table, looked out on it, blankly. The Pembroke place boasted several acres—which ought to have been the salvation of its present prisoners; but a fate whose surname was malice, had contrived now to shut them off from even out-of-doors.

"I shall write letters," murmured Hilary, from her ironical position behind Louis' coffee-urn.

"You won't be allowed to post them," said Brent, staring out disgustedly at the drenched drive.

"Humph! Guess I'll make up my accounts"—Nash munched quite cheerfully at

toast and marmalade. Then, his face falling —"consarn it, I packed my books in the steamer-trunk!"

Louis began something about finishing leather binding he was tooling, only to remember that it would certainly be ruined in the general fumigation. Each of the four subsided, gloomily: they had thought to go, each about his individual affair; only to find themselves hopelessly, helplessly, in one another's laps—for diversion, occupation of any sort.

"Well," said Hilary desperately, "there's the paper, anyhow." Nash had gone down to the letter-box before breakfast to get it. "It seems"—she pointed to a lengthy column, with her rosy nail—"we're celebrities, overnight!"

"Yes—confounded impertinence!" growled Louis. "By noon the reporters will probably be sitting down at the gate, under umbrellas, watching us eat. They'll bring their field-glasses, and make a 'scoop' of it. Vultures!"

It did not occur to him to wonder what they would have made of the situation as it might have been—as he had intended it to be, that morning. Only Nash said, slowly, "yees; they can brew all kinds of a tornado in a teapot, these newspaper fellows. And when there actually is a tornado——"

He broke off, brusquely, and applied himself to the *North China Daily News*. Louis looked out of the window—anywhere except at Hilary; and Brent asked if he might have more coffee.

"Anyhow, we've a most comfortable jail," he said, almost contentedly; as Hilary handed the full cup back to him. And Louis—quick as a child to respond to appreciation of himself or his belongings—smiled.

"It isn't a bad sort of house, is it?" he returned eagerly. "I did it all myself. Kincross — the architect — thought I was crazy, to have no doors between these rooms, for one thing; but I wanted the space."

"And the colour." Hilary half closed her eyes to look at it: the long stretches of tan, broken by warm purple, in the room beyond; here, the precious translucence of Japanese blue. And the dining-room was wainscoted in birch bark, of satiny smoked white. "With the teak chairs and things, it's delicious," pronounced the woman. "Even a scientist thinks so, don't you, John?"

The glance that slipped to Brent from under her lashes was at once innocent and *malin*; he was as ashamed of being irritated as he would have been at the harmless teeth of a puppy biting rather sharply for the moment. But he was irritated. "There was always that war between us," he said deliberately: "the old war—of science with idealism, art if you like to call it. We were always fighting, weren't we, Hilary?"

The revenge (that past which was there, whenever he should choose to draw it forth) went home. Though she returned, lightly enough, "Were we? I've forgotten." And

proved that the puppy was not a clumsy puppy, anyhow.

Louis pushed back his chair with a grating sound. "I must go over to the Line and ask how Ping is," he said, curtly; all his hostility for Brent bristling again.

But Brent merely said, with a bland smile, "I'll go with you," and followed him out of the room; leaving Hilary and her husband alone, over the breakfast-table; alone for the first time, since . . .

"Well," Nash looked up over his paper, with surprising briskness, "I guess, after *this*, your friends'll be calling up by the bushel. I guess 'twon't be so dull for you, after all."

"No," said Hilary briefly.

"I"—the square, brown-faced man looked over at her awkwardly—"I sent word to Hop Ling to send out some violets and stuff. These potted things Louis 's got (nodding at the azaleas and Japanese trees in the window)—I reckon they're all very artistic, but I thought

it'd be kind o' cheerful to have some real flowers about."

"That was very thoughtful of you"—Hilary left the table, and went over to stand in passionate nearness to the delicate azaleas. "You are—always—very considerate, Nash," she said, difficultly. "I—thank you."

"Oh," said he, gruffly—her back was turned to him, she could not see the look in his face—"I consider myself, don't you fret. I sent for a box o' cigars, and some o' that old Chartreuse, and—Lord, I guess I called up most o' Shanghai, before you were up, this mornin'. Er—did you sleep well, Hal?"

"Not very well. I was—restless, I suppose." Hilary's eyes were on the driving rain and the dreary taupe country beyond Louis' fields. Suddenly her hands went up to her temples, to press against them. "Oh, if they don't let us out of here at the end of three days——!"

"Don't you fret." A stiff smile was on Nash's lips; he did not remind her that yes-

terday she had announced almost with triumph her intention to stay there. "Doc. says it's a slim chance they'll keep us longer than that."

She was looking towards the gate, where a sinister yellow flag curled in draggled dampness; and then, in the other direction, towards that significant chalk line. The menace, unheeded in yesterday's excitement, this morning was real enough. Hilary's clear face whitened; she half turned—involuntarily, to Nash, as she had many times, for comfort, reassurance. "If one of us *should* get it," was her frightened whisper; "if Louis——"

Nash looked at her: her fingers touching yearningly one of Louis' pale pink blossoms; in her white gown, against Louis' silver birch and limpid blues, seeming to have grown there: "I guess you needn't worry about Louis," he said, a little thickly. "I guess Louis'll come out all right—every way."

She turned round altogether then, her

slenderness outlined tall against the window. "I must tell you," she began determinedly, "I want to talk to you about——" but the words stuck in her throat.

Nash's face lighted strangely. "I guess you don't want to talk now, Hal," he said gently; "you take your time. And later on —Lord, there'll be time enough for talkin'— anything you want to."

She gazed at him mutely; something overlay the familiar brown features, that she had never before seen to recognise. Was it nobility? She gave an inward shocked gasp, and when Louis came in, searched his face for the expression. But it was not there: that rare, sturdy gentleness. Nor in Brent's face, either; could one imagine Brent gentle? What was it Nash had, that these two lacked? The question was the first insinuating finger to poke a peep-hole between Hilary's ingenuousness and—Truth.

And, of course, she promptly turned her back on the peep-hole, demanding breathlessly,

of the two men returning, "How is that poor Ping? Did he have a good night? Is he any better this morning? What did the nurse say?"

"H'm!"—Brent frowned—"things might be better. Then again, they might be a great deal worse."

Hilary shook herself—like a puppy, exasperated. "These physicians' answers! If ever they gave a definite yes or no, I'm sure they'd go to bed themselves—out of sheer terror at the blunder!"

"But my dear child," he laughed, "I assure you it's so. One might have hoped the fever would be less this morning; then again, it isn't as high as in a really virulent case. Li, the nurse, you know, has been giving him sponges; and Sanders ought to be along soon, to pass some sort of bulletin."

"Meantime, Doc.," put in Nash carelessly, "you said you'd show me those cultures, under the glass. I'll be darned interested to see"—he took Brent's arm, and talking intently,

drew him into the living-room; leaving Louis and Hilary alone.

While Brent was getting the microscope, he sat with his back to the room beyond; with its illusion of blue sky, and its silver bark, and its delicate flowers. From there, now came the murmur of voices—young voices.

"How old 're you, Doc.?" asked Nash abruptly, as the bold black head of the doctor reappeared.

"Forty," said Brent a bit belligerently, setting down his slides. "Why?"

"I'm forty-three. That's *some* age, ain't it?" Nash looked for a moment hard at the cigar he was about to cut.

"Pooh," scoffed Brent, "it's no age at all, if you're in condition. But I wouldn't give ten cash for yours," he continued tersely, "a cigar hasn't any."

"Tut-tut, Doctor mustn't call names." Nash gave a croaky laugh. "I only asked because—oh, well, I've been thinkin' a good deal about this age business lately."

He looked at the other man's strong figure, bent over a fragile bit of glass. "You an American, aren't you, Doc.?" he bolted again irrelevantly.

"Yes." Brent was carefully adjusting his lens.

"Humph! We're a bit of all nations, here—I'm an Australian m'self; though I've spent a lot of my life in America, North and South, and knockin' about a bit everywhere. What'd you come out to Shanghai for?"

Brent laughed. "To keep out of jail. Ruined myself buying microscopes and ten-dollar books, and engaged as ship's doctor, to retrench. By the time I got to Shanghai, I'd saved enough money to go on shore, so—here I am."

"Exactly," drawled Nash, "*here* you are; and liable to get that wish o' yours yesterday a bit more completely than you'll care for. I shouldn't wonder,"—he took his cigar from his mouth, and looked steadily into Brent's keen face—"I shouldn't wonder if before we

get out of here, you know me pret-ty well. And I you."

Brent looked back at him, with the same steadiness. "I hope so," he said. Adding, "The glass is quite all right now—will you see?"

Nash squinted into the microscope. "George! Are they cholera—those squirmers? See 'em kick! Gad, that poor Chink's got my sympathy if he's full o' those!"

"It's the culture Sanders took last night—I've to turn it over to him this morning. Look out—for God's sake, man, don't touch the slide! If you had a scratch on you, and one of those squirmers as you call 'em got in it——"

"Well," Nash straightened, to look quietly into his eyes, "what if it did?"

"Only," said the doctor shortly, "that I'd choose a pleasanter method of suicide, if it was to be mine."

"Humph!" Nash laughed mirthlessly. "Guess I ain't suicidin' yet awhile. Tell me

some more about these things—I'll keep hands off."

The morning sped by—broken by telephone calls, as Nash had predicted, from half of Shanghai; Hilary or Louis would have to come in to answer, but would vanish again, immediately, back to the dining-room. And the two men, left alone, with the microscope between them, at the end of the morning found themselves friends. "I don't like your philosophy," said Nash bluntly, when Louis called them to lunch, "but by the Almighty, I like *you!*"

"Shake," said Brent solemnly. "I don't know your philosophy"—his eyes narrowed shrewdly; "I suspect you of sentimentalism, but——"

"Can't say,"—Nash shook his rough brown head—"my psychic workin's have never bothered me. Been too busy livin' I guess, to inquire why. Let's to grub, eh?"

V

If the morning had been short, the afternoon was endless. Dr. Sanders came during lunch; called Brent out on to the veranda, for a few clipped sentences—which the latter repeated in still briefer form, to those inside; and departed, leaving the day shorn of further incident. It was the more intolerable, in its sluggish monotony, to the group on this side of the Line, since they knew that on the other side—a distance of a hundred feet—fight was being waged: the oldest and fiercest. And they were handcuffed, among luxurious cushions, *bibelots*, and flowers: forced, as futile things, to look on.

"Arrant rot, you know, it all is," Brent burst forth impatiently, during the dumb silence that followed Sanders' departure; "if men were logical, we'd have chloroformed the poor

wretch twenty-four hours ago, and had done with it. He'd have been a deal better off than sweating through life on five Mexicans a month. But no: here we sit, letting him keep us chained up for days, all our work at a full stop, while he plays chromatic scales on our sentimentality! Not mine, mind you," he hastened to add, "I haven't any."

"Oh, haven't you!" retorted Comer, with actually a grin under his moustache. "What ails you, is that you've got so all-fired much, you're scared to death of it—and can't keep from sayin' so. Put that in your psychology pipe and taste it," he added succinctly.

Which Brent unwillingly, at the present moment, was doing. Apparently engulfed in a sea of German literature, with which he had inundated the window-seat, he was in reality (and most irritably) concerned with Comer's analysis. *He* sentimental!—he, who had thrown over sentiment with the mush and milk of valentines, and tombstones for his pet dogs!

What did Comer know about him anyhow? Never'd had two words with him, till yesterday afternoon. To be sure, they'd made rather swift strides this morning, but—accusing him of being "scared"! Accusing him before Hilary, and that sulky youngster Pembroke: the impudence, the—the utter absurdity. And yet—slily a succession of links slipped through his mind: reiterated negation from repression, from unconscious, strong attraction: the threadbare tracery one had applied to how many cases—but never to oneself. Well, if it were true, if deep-rooted within him was the unconscious desire actually to be a sentimentalist; now that he knew he would no longer crush, but tear the thing out by the roots. Nothing (how often had he declared it, inexorably?) should remain in him, to weaken his logic; nothing ever should dim the fine light of his critical faculty.

He looked up, his forehead a mass of determined lines; and saw Hilary, standing in the doorway—smiling at him.

"Isn't it time for tea?" she said. "Where are the others?"

"I—I don't know," he stammered, rising; staring at her, almost dazedly. She was wearing a pale, floating robe of sea-green stuff, shot with silver, and fastened at the side with a quaint clasp of fiery opals. Out of it rose the subtle, long throat, the fine oval face in its waves of cloudy hair; and half lost in its folds, yet singularly distinct, were the expressive hands —small-boned and slender.

"I never saw you wear that dress before," he said foolishly—since for four years he had scarcely seen her at all.

"This?" Again she smiled, and came on into the room. "It's an old tea-gown—almost in rags, or I shouldn't have it out here. What are you doing?" She picked up one of his magazines. "The Germans; are they interesting?"

"Yes—no. I mean, of course they are," he recovered himself angrily. "I've spent a thoroughly keen afternoon."

"That's nice," said Hilary, "then you're ready for tea. Find Louis and Nash—I've had a nap, myself, I'm starving."

Brent muttered acquiescence. "Oh, and here's the kettle"—she handed it to him, as he was about to leave the room—"not *too* full."

He took it and went out, inwardly fuming. That he should stutter like a stupid boy in his teens, over a mere pretty woman, in an effective gown. No doubt she had put the thing on for that very purpose: the female passion to attract all males within preying distance. He was the one left to conquer, or to re-conquer—an added zest in that. While he filled the kettle, he shredded her to the raw and elemental; while he was carrying it back, mystery and her own provoking elusiveness crept upon his creature of crude pulse, and baffled him.

"Where are Louis and Nash?" she asked again, as he came into sight.

"I forgot them," he said: that nagging

science of his whispering tauntingly, " because you wanted to forget them ! "

He set down the kettle, and wheeled towards the door. " I'll find them at once," said he vehemently.

They had tea and plum-cake, and very good bread-and-butter, which Hilary dispensed in the firelight, while the three men sat round, as at any lady's conventional party. The grim Line and the war waging beyond it, were forgotten for an hour; and the deadlier war begun yesterday within this very room; while the pleasant rattle of tea-cups held sway—and chatter: of the battle-ship in port, of Bert Chetwynd's polo-ponies, the Saturday dances at the golf club, the new Japanese photographer in Nanking Road. A thousand topics were caught up, juggled an instant, dropped in turn for others; the talk was animated, even absorbed; and nobody but Brent knew that it was all because Hilary had put on " an old tea-gown." The marvel is that he forgot it; and sat there watching her

among the white flowers—for Nash's violets had evolved into three boxes of lilies and roses and rare anemone, which Louis had arranged in shallow bowls and tall vases, flooding the room with fragrance and delight.

Brent sniffed them, while affably drinking three cups of tea (which he abhorred); and quite forgetting the irritation of the afternoon, in the supreme comfort of now. He had been a bachelor for so long—twenty years—leading the dreariest of bachelor existences, in hotels and boarding-houses; he was childishly pleased with the care with which Hilary poured his special cup, with her puckered solicitude, as she asked, "two lumps? I *ought* to remember."

Hilary herself had not a hint of the child she usually recalled. She was wholly the woman, now, to the three men: soothing them, ministering to them, now and then smiling at them—her swift vanishing smile, gone almost before it was come; handling them deftly with her woman's tact, so that each in his secret soul

felt the least bit more anxiously attended than the other two. And when finally she rose from the low table, saying, "play something, Louis—do"; even then the illusion was not broken. For her glance at Louis was of simple friendliness. Nash echoed heartily, "sure, Louis—the orchestra's all that's wantin'—strike up."

So Louis played. It was the hour that, yesterday, the thunderbolt had fallen; and already the grotesque was becoming the familiar: the group in the living-room had come to have their characteristic places. Hilary by the fire, chin propped on her slim hand; Brent in the window-seat, frowning out into the wet; Nash in stiff comfort on the settle. While Louis, when he was not prowling about the kitchen, or holding parley with Li, across the Line, was apt to be found in his present position on the piano-stool; his long legs gracefully disposed towards the pedals, his splendid head and shoulders arrogantly thrown back.

Arrogance was one of Louis' most attractive attitudes to Hilary. He ruled her beautifully, she said; and made her do exactly what he wanted. Quite unconsciously. She was an egoist born, not cultivated; it was her destiny about her neck, rather than a throne on which she sat. Hence she was delighted to believe that Louis ruled her: in Hilary's mind, that was what a man, *one* man, should do. But always from his knees, of course. Louis was one of the seven men then in the world who looked well on his knees. As Hilary had not seen the other six, she was very happy contemplating Louis. She now sat, eyes fixed dreamily on the back of his head; immersed in the way his hair grew off his temples, blissfully deaf to the way he was bungling his minor chords.

The rain still dripped, on the roof and the end of the porch. Nash, his short legs tucked under the settle, smoked methodically; and pondered. He should have been twenty-four hours out at sea, by this time; while Hal—his brown right hand went up to cover the

twisted mouth. Could he have stayed there in the Club, as he had planned, all evening; while she, to his certain knowledge, was coming here—to Louis? When the time came, could he really have done it? The scrap of conversation he had overheard two days before, and that laid their plan before him—his nails dug into his palms. At any rate, their audacity proved their inexperience: discussing elopement at the consul's garden-party! They were two babies, tossing a lighted fire-cracker back and forth; only just before it exploded in their faces, some one cut the fuse. Apparently a Chinese "boy"; but "God A'mighty, *I* don't know," Nash muttered to himself, "I don't know who it was stepped in. But I know that if somethin' don't happen in the next two days, it'll be worse than ever it was; for this time they'll put the match to the powder direct!

"And this Doc. Brent thinks he can prevent 'em," he concluded scornfully; "or that I can, which is still funnier. My one chance"

(he peered through the growing dusk at those misty grey eyes fixed upon Louis), "my *only* chance 'll be when Hal talks—as she tried to, this mornin'. If she doesn't, and Louis doesn't—he's run from me like I was a leper, to-day—if neither of 'em lets down the bars, this new deal might as well not 6' happened."

"Humph!" He pulled himself up, with a start of disgust. "I'm droolin' along like my granny; and this damn cigar's gone out." With which he re-lit it, and begged Louis to play the Merry Widow waltz. "That's a darn lively piece," he commented.

Brent, from the window, snorted audibly. To Brent, all of Louis' music was plain drivel; syrupy tinkle-tinkle, that he would willingly have annihilated. Brent's idea of music was Richard Strauss, just as his idea of art was Rodin, and of literature Herbert Spencer; otherwise, he considered, piano-playing a saccharine scourge. Not Hilary's playing, to be sure. But then, Hilary didn't play. She sat and moved her fingers and music came

and crooned to her in its clasp, or swept her with its majesty, or rent her fiercely. One might smile indulgently at Hilary the woman; but before Hilary at her piano, one was in a cathedral: as small and as hushed; as spell-bound under the flood of light and colour.

If Hilary had played to them, now! After the sifting well-being of the tea-hour, to have sat in the dusk and heard Hilary playing. Brent's fancy flitted back to the little *pension* parlour, and the supple girl's figure (as he had seen it many times) bending in rapt unconsciousness over the keys. What was she, at such moments? He looked towards her, through the gloaming—and saw a woman, worshipping her lover.

"Bah!" said Brent furiously.

"H'm?" Hilary stirred a little. "Did you say something?"

"No, of course not!" he snapped. "I was listening to the *music*."

"Well, your agony's over," said Louis, leaving the piano abruptly. All the neutrality

of an hour ago was dissipated; the whirr of arrows was in the air.

Somebody switched on the lights; somebody else gathered up the tea-tray. Outside, the rain fell, drip, drip. And the first day of quarantine was ended.

VI

"HELLO . . . hello . . . yes, it's I, Betty—how do you do? Oh, rather well, thanks—that is, we're waiting to hear our doom this morning" (Hilary's little laugh was slightly shrill). "The doctor is going to tell us if we may break quarantine to-morrow . . . Yes, wouldn't it be splendid? But we don't know yet, he's coming at eleven . . . Yes" (Nash and Louis, sitting near, saw her bite her lip), "it's been rather dreadful—I mean, with the rain and all, but Mr. Pembroke has been the kindest of hosts . . . What? Oh, he's better, they hope he may pull through, though of course they can't tell yet . . . What do you say? . . . Oh!"

Hilary suddenly turned her back to the two men, altogether. It was a full minute before she went on, talking steadily into the 'phone.

"Excuse me, Betty—you asked if we should go on to Manila, directly, as we'd planned. I don't know. You see, we may not get out to-morrow after all."

"By Jove"—Louis flung himself out of the chair in which he was sitting, and stalked to the other end of the room—"I believe she hopes we *won't* get out—actually!"

"And then" (Hilary was saying) "of course we shall have to make entirely new plans . . . Oh, there is? What opera company? . . . No, I think I've never heard of it; but what excitement for Shanghai! Well, if they're to be in town a week we may hear them . . . Thursday? Why, yes, Betty, I should love it—if this wretched quarantine is lifted . . . What? Oh—yes, yes, of course—just a minute, I'll ask him."

She turned from the telephone and said to Nash, "It's Betty Fayerweather, and she says the Tivoli Opera Company is coming here next week. She—wants us to go with her, Thursday."

"Hilary!" Louis strode swiftly back across the room.

"What shall I answer?" Hilary asked her husband.

"Tell her, yes," said Nash indistinctly. His right hand tugged at the ragged moustache that hid his mouth.

So Hilary told her yes. "That is, if it can be arranged, Betty," she added, being a very woman where it came to shifting decisions on to others and then promptly re-capturing them for herself. "Did you go to the hunt, yesterday," she went on in her usual serene voice. "With Mr. Chetwynd, of course! Betty, Betty . . . No, I'm not teasing; I'm only wondering why you haven't let me give an announcement party, that's all. . . Nonsense! Well, goodbye, dear . . . Yes, of course, I'll let you know—the minute we know ourselves. Goodbye."

Hilary hung up the 'phone. Nash and Louis waited: the moment, in its suspense, for each of them was dynamic.

"H'm—Betty will certainly marry Mr. Chetwynd," said Hilary pensively, wrinkling up her nose.

Louis turned on his heel. Nash muttered, "By jiminy!"

"Well, don't you think so?" asked Hilary, plumping a cushion before she sat down against it on the couch.

Nash gazed at her, speechlessly, for a moment; then, without a word, left the room.

"Harry," Louis burst out hotly, "do you realise what you've done? You've given that —that—you've given Nash to understand that when quarantine's raised you'll go back with him!"

"Well," said Hilary unperturbed, "so I shall."

"You——!" He sank down beside her, thunderstruck.

"Don't you see," she said earnestly, "it will all have to be begun over again?"

"What?"

"Why—everything. Nash will have to go

away, I shall have to come to you again. I couldn't just *stay* here, you know."

"Why not?" he demanded imperiously. "Didn't you say that first evening, 'he will have to go away, and then we'll be together as we'd planned'? Didn't you mean——"

"But not like that"—her eyes, turned up to him, were troubled—"I think that would be horrid. It would look so—so cowardly. Not like coming of my own free will. Don't you see how it would look?"

"No, I don't," he declared flatly. "And what's more I believe you didn't see it so, either, until—it's Brent who's put the ridiculous notion into your head," he broke off furiously. "Brent would stop at nothing, no matter how absurd, to block me—to keep me from winning you altogether. Miserable, hypocritical bounder! He——"

Hilary rose.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not going to listen to another tirade against John," said she firmly. "There've

been so many in the last two days, Louis—and so unnecessary. As though *he*——"

"For heaven's sake, sit down," begged Louis feverishly, "things are ghastly enough without—at any rate," he said, the moment she had yielded, "you can't deny that he was talking to you for over an hour last night—while Nash and I were washing dishes!"

Hilary's shoulders went up despairingly. "And what if he was?"

"He was talking to you about us, I'll warrant! Trying to argue you into——"

"Well?" She returned his glance steadily. "Trying to argue me into what?"

"Oh—nothing," he muttered. Adding, with a gloomy look at her, "one thing's certain: something's changed you. You're not the same. You don't even look at me the same—as you did even two days ago. And when you said that to Nash, just now, I tell you it made me crazy!"

Hilary reached up and kissed him. "You're a very foolish boy," she said—her laugh the

least bit vexed. "You don't seem to remember that I love you."

"Well"—he snatched her to him, victoriously—"sometimes you don't seem to remember it yourself!"

"As for my talk with John," she said, a few moments later—drawing herself, flushed and radiant, from Louis' arms—"he was telling me about his cases and things. Oh, it *was* interesting!—frightfully complicated, yet when he explains it, it seems the simplest thing in the world. One can understand how a man could become absolutely absorbed in such things."

"Oh, he's absorbed in 'em right enough!" retorted Louis. "A man evaporated into a scientist is what he is—or thinks he is," he added, his brow clouding again.

Hilary said, half to herself, "He's changed, since Vienna. He seems—somehow, not so hard. And there's excuse for his having er—evaporated, as you call it, if he can turn wretched bundles of wrecked nerves into

sane, healthy people again. I think it's splendid!"

"I say," protested Louis, with an aggrieved laugh, "you aren't going to spend the whole morning talking to me about Brent! And I want you to promise," he went on vehemently, "that you'll put this extraordinary idea about going off to the hotel with Nash out of your head. Harry, dearest—won't you, for me?"

"You've made me promise such a lot," she murmured—though her fingers within his tightened. "First, that I wouldn't talk things over with Nash—that does seem stupid, Louis; and—and as though I were ashamed. Especially after my telling him I *wanted* to talk——"

"You know why I ask it," he interrupted swiftly. "Nash knows too, no doubt. He'd work on your feelings—or he'd preach morality to you——"

"No," Hilary shook her head, "I don't think Nash would do that."

"Anyhow, he'd play on your emotions," said Louis loftily; assured himself of being concerned only with her reason. "I can't have that. If he bothers you to talk, I shall tell him I can't have it."

"I don't think he'll bother me. Really," said Hilary, "he's been very good."

"Because," said Louis triumphantly, "he sees there's not the slightest chance of moving you—don't you see? If once you opened an argument, or let him open one—but you won't," he remembered, with a sigh of relief; "you've promised."

"Yes," she sighed too; stirred restlessly out of her nest of cushions. "I think I'll practise for a while now, Louis."

"Oh! Well, if you will—" he jumped up, injured; it was the first time she had voluntarily broken one of their rare tête-à-têtes—"I'll go over to the Line and see Li. Sanders ought to be along soon."

"Yes," said Hilary again. She stood by one

of the long windows for a moment, gazing at a vase of Nash's roses.

"Harry, Harry!" The man for whom she had left Nash came over and put his arms about her. "Do you realise it's almost over—our purgatory? This time to-morrow——"

"But we may not get out," said she, for the second time that morning.

His arms dropped to his sides. "We *shall* get out," he declared between his teeth. "I intend that we shall!"

Hilary watched the determined lines of his back, till it vanished through the dining-room. "We very nearly quarrelled," she thought; remembering, then, "Nash and I have never quarrelled. John would say because we didn't care enough—I suppose that's true." But she found herself suddenly with her eye to that peep-hole: *was* it true—from Nash's side?

She backed away from the peep-hole hastily, and sat down to a severe half hour of scales. In self-defence against the rain (which still

continued) she went to work at her practising each morning after breakfast. And this morning, to the men's resentful astonishment, she had also risen early and got the breakfast: Hilary making omelettes and waffles! Perhaps burning her lovely hands on the smutty irons, or at the very least getting all hot and mussy. It was not to be thought of.

Only Brent, after that reflexive second thought of his—which for some reason was not working very well these days—said, "Nonsense! Go along and get as mussy as you can—do you good."

"I think so too," Hilary had said tranquilly. While Nash and Louis glared; and proceeded to eat every one of the waffles.

At the present moment they were plodding down to the gate to fetch the provisions for the day. Hilary, hearing the kitchen door bang, looked up and smiled—at the sight of the tall figure and the short, trundling the wheel-barrow down the drive between them. Then out of the corner of her eye, she saw

Brent—coming in from the dining-room; and caught him smiling too. She wished, a little crossly, she could get over this fashion of doing things at the same time as Brent.

"Do that last movement over again, Hilary," he called enthusiastically, establishing himself in his window. "Ta, ta, da, la, la *la*—the water motif, delicious!"

"I thought you said you must read this morning?"—Hilary did not turn round.

"I am one of the few persons," he replied modestly, "who can do two things at the same time, and enjoy them enormously. *Please.*"

So Hilary played. She rather liked having Brent, the unruffled impersonalist, say please to her like that. The unruffled impersonalist let his magazine tumble to the floor; while he stared out at the rain, and listened. The water motif threaded its delicate way, purling, tripping, through the quiet of the big room; Brent remembered when she had been studying it: when she had used to come in after her

lesson, flushed, ecstatic—the little blue bonnet pushed impatiently off her dark hair.

"Hilary," he said suddenly, "have you still that blue bonnet?"

The water motif broke off with a brusque discord. "No," said Hilary, briefly. And crashed into the Sonata Appassionata.

At which Brent's science grinned; and something else in him (which, by the way, he was going to tear out by the roots) popped out and throttled it. He tackled his dream-analysis again—the Germans were wonderful at these things. This Schwartz for example—confound it, why had he spent that hour of opportunity last night, talking to Hilary about this dream stuff? His first, perhaps his only chance at uninterrupted conversation with her; and he had improved it by unfolding a series of fantasies apropos of homogeneous sex! Dunderhead! he cursed himself, disgustedly.

And when he stopped short to analyze that, traced it directly to her own sceptical finger, pointed suggestively at his process: "be sure

you have something to give" (she had said) "before you take something away." And though he had scarcely heeded it at the time, unconsciously he was held up by the idea—the fear, that he might (as she hinted) leave the situation worse than he found it. Stuff! He threw down his magazine, out of patience with himself. As though it could be made worse by bringing them—one of them, at least, Hilary—to use the eyes of intelligence on this emotional mess they were embroiled in! He'd begin now—this minute.

"Hilary," he cleared his throat, tentatively——

Whereupon Nash and Louis stamped in dripping, and at the same time the telephone rang. Brent said a low and fervent "damn," and flung himself into an article on anthropoid apes.

Then Sanders came, and he went out on to the veranda to consult with him, and hear the verdict. The two physicians talked together for over an hour. When Brent came in again, the other three were at lunch.

"Well, what's the news?" asked Nash, with a fine assumption of carelessness. "Going to let us go free, is he?"

Brent sat down in his place opposite Hilary. "It's eight days," he said—wishing there would not creep into his voice that tone with which he announced a major operation to a patient.

"Eight"—the word stuck thick in Louis' throat.

"Shucks," said Nash, gazing hard over Hilary's head, "that does seem——"

"Why are they doing it?" asked Hilary clearly.

"She's the man of the lot!" Brent told himself, meeting her steady eyes. Aloud he answered, "The authorities are coming down hard, because this is the only case reported since the clean-up, and they're determined it shan't be given the remotest chance to spread."

"So *we* pay the piper!" Louis put in savagely.

"Sanders did all he could—told them he'd

fumigate us from cellar to garret; but they're obdurate. And, of course," Brent added, glancing at Louis, "the period of incubation isn't limited to three days—though that's usual."

"You mean," bolted Louis, "it may get me yet. Thanks!"

"I don't mean it," Brent smiled, good-humouredly, "but the health authorities do. Personally, I think—as I've told you all along—there's not one chance in a hundred that you were infected. There's one in a thousand, perhaps; and we can't blame the community for not wishing to run even that."

"The community!" Louis exploded. "Oh—it's unendurable!" He rose from the table, violently, and left the room.

"Young, ain't he?" Nash looked after him, ruminatively.

Hilary, too, with a murmured excuse, slipped away.

At the far end of the living-room, where she found Louis, he gripped her hands. "Are

you going to stand this?" he cried. "Five more days like these last three? Dogged, watched, spied on, by——"

"It isn't that bad," she stopped him, soothingly; "really I think they've been quite considerate."

"Considerate! When they never leave us alone for five minutes—Brent anyhow," he added, with an impulse of justice. "You can be sure Brent fixed this. I believe he *told* Sanders——"

"But Louis"—said Hilary, wide-eyed—"what would John gain by it? He wants to be free as much as any of us."

Louis scowled darkly. "I'm not so sure about that. He wants above all things to 'save a situation.' Well, he won't do it. Listen, Harry!"

She looked at him, half frightened. "What do you mean? What is in your mind?"

He caught her to him, reckless of the fact that the other two men might come in at any minute. "You love me? I mean—it wasn't

just what Brent said, an impulse, and because you were bored—oh, you know why I say this! I told you this morning—you've been different the last day or two—Harry, you really love me?"

"Why yes, of course. What," delicately disdainful, "does John know about it?"

"Then listen: I'm going to get us out of here to-night, do you see?"

"Louis!" she breathed fearfully.

"Yes." He continued to speak in a low, cautious voice, but with an intense excitement; and holding her fast: "I've thought of a plan—I thought of it this morning, when you said what if we couldn't break quarantine to-morrow. It's this: the Lloyd steamer sails at midnight for Yokohama. We can get away after the rest have gone to bed, and be aboard her in time. Will you, Harry—will you?"

Hilary was very pale. "But, Louis, you're talking madness! Why the minute they'd discover us on the boat——"

"They won't discover us. I'll get Lawrence on the 'phone—Lawrence is Lloyd's agent, you know; I'll tell him one of my men from Hankow and his wife are going to Yokohama by to-night's boat and ask him to save good rooms for them. None of the officers on the boat know me, or you either; and we'll go on board through the second-class—it'll be too late for any people we know to be down, anyhow. We can stay in our cabins until Yokohama, and if by that time the fat's in the fire, we'll be together at least—and alone! Harry, say you will!"

She laid her hands on his breast. "But oh, Louis, if we *should* carry the contagion! If you——"

"Nonsense," he interrupted swiftly. "Didn't you hear Brent say there was one chance in a thousand? And we aren't such cowards as the 'community,' I think! Do I look as though I were coming down with cholera?"

She gazed up at him adoringly. "No, no,

dearest. But the contagion itself—I've heard that it's in the very atmosphere, that people can carry it even without being infected themselves. Suppose——"

"Nonsense," said Louis again, more shortly. "Brent said yesterday that that is an exploded theory. The authorities are simply making an example of us; well!" he bent his face to hers ardently, "I've something better to do than to be an example! Quick—they're coming. *Will you?* Ah, my sweetheart——"

"I'll think it over—I'll let you know," she answered hurriedly. "Later——"

When Brent came in, she was apparently engrossed with a book. Louis had disappeared.

"Oh!" with an uncertain smile she put the book down. "Where is Nash?"

"Doing a smoke in the kitchen. He says," Brent smiled too, rather a nice smile, "you don't like strong cigars."

She laughed a little constrainedly. "No, I don't. But cigarettes—you're going to

have a cigarette? Yes, do have one—and sit here. "I"—with another laugh—"I'm so bored, I want to talk."

Brent—instantly alive to the undercurrent—was puzzled. She had been so self-contained at lunch; and why excitement, anyhow? Rebellion perhaps, but——

He lit a cigarette, and sat down. "Well, what shall we talk about? You, me, or trivialities? The one thing I refuse to talk about," he announced firmly, "is cholera."

The pink stole into Hilary's cheeks. "You really think Louis' danger—all our danger—is passed? You think this detention is simply—simply super-caution?"

Brent looked at her hopelessly. "Hilary, Hilary—the woman it is! I say that I'm *not* going to talk about it, and you promptly ask me three questions!"

"Only two," she protested, laughing a bit breathlessly. "Do answer them."

"I think," said he resignedly, "only a very ugly miracle could give Pembroke or any of us,

the cholera now. Certainly our chief danger lay with Pembroke."

"Then it isn't true that it is—what do they call it?—air-borne?" Through clothes and things"—she was evidently under tremendous control.

"Certainly not." He repeated Louis' very words: "that is an exploded theory."

"Ah!" she breathed sharply.

"Why, what's the matter with you? Look here"—he threw away his cigarette, and bent towards her. "Have you been making yourself ill worrying about this thing, and keeping quiet about it? You absurd child! Why, I could almost say there isn't a chance in a million, now——"

Hilary relaxed, smiled at him almost brilliantly. "That's all I wanted to know," she said; and stole away to her own room, before he could detain her.

"Another opportunity lost," grumbled Brent. "Well, there'll be more o' 'em now—five days. H'm——" he fell into a study. The

situation, as now extended, offered new aspects. Singularly enough, the continued isolation from his patients was not one of those that presented themselves to Brent. He found himself, more vitally than he had ever realised, intent on preventing Hilary from making a mess of things with Pembroke. He believed, nay, was sure he could prevent her; since her husband evidently wouldn't. Hilary was a sensible woman—in every way that she wasn't an unreasonable idiot; she was *not* a woman who could set codes aside and be happy without them. This was the line of suggestion to follow. Perhaps he could get her again to-night after dinner. Anyhow——

While he was laying plans, Hilary in the hall beyond was telling Louis: "I'll do it. I'll go with you. But I must—I *must* leave some sort of word for Nash. I kept my promise about not talking to him, but I can't go without leaving him some word."

Louis kissed her again and again. His eyes were burning, his hands unsteady, like

those of a man in a fever. "You can leave a note, of course," he said. "Only don't give the slightest clue to where we're going. Don't even write it till just before we go—oh," with a shaky laugh, "I'm ridiculously nervous, I know; but we've been balked once, and—it made me nearly crazy."

He stooped then, his voice melting to the tenderness that had been routed by the strain of these last three days. "Harry, Harry, you've made me so happy," he whispered, kissing her hands. "You'll never regret it, darling—I won't let you. And as soon as the coast is clear, I'll telephone Lawrence."

She clung to him, tremulously, for a moment, then, at his suggestion, went to her room to pack a bag. Feeling like a criminal as she did so, and yet—when she caught sight from one window, of that taunting yellow flag; from the other window, of that sinister chalk line—no, she would *not* be rifled of her happiness by a sordid thing with which she had no part. Louis was right: the three days had

been torment; the more for Hilary in that she had had to serve as buffer between Louis and the two who, he insisted, hounded him. With a weary little sigh, she confessed the end of her strength. The situation was impossible; authorities or no authorities it had to end.

That evening before dinner, Louis managed to tell her that he had got Lawrence. "He'll have the rooms for us—I gave the name of Dering—and a cab to meet us at Nanking Road. I told him my friends were stopping at my go-downs to collect some boxes. Don't worry, dear—at that hour there'll be no one there. And at ten," he cried exultantly, "we'll be gone!"

VII

BRENT remembered afterward that it had seemed an unusually long evening. They finished dinner early, and by eight o'clock were sitting round the fire again. The rain had stopped, only to be succeeded by a drenching fog: the yellow thick of it seemed to press its face up against the windows and struggle to get in.

Dr. Sanders made his evening visit and departed. From the grim place beyond the Line came silence, and a faint point of light through the fog. "Things not so good over there to-night, what?" Nash glanced up sharply at Brent, over the chess-board on the table between them.

"None too good," Brent returned—watching Hilary, who sat at the desk, writing. He wondered why, since she could not post

letters. "Must have been a false crisis Li reported last night," he added; "that's the worst phase of cholera—these treacherous relapses, when you think the crisis has been passed."

"Poor old Ping," said Louis carelessly, "I'm afraid he's a dead 'un." He twirled the piano-stool to proper height, and sat down. Brent, surprised at the uncharacteristic callousness, wondered what had got into him. At dinner he had been actually gay—laughing and telling stories, fairly scintillating; and through it all friendly for the first time—quite the polished host at an intimate dinner-party. Now he began to rattle off comic opera and ragtime at a deafening pace. What had got into him?

Hilary finished her letter, and came to watch the game of chess for a while; but at the end of half an hour she said she was tired, and was going to bed. Nash and Brent made a dash to open the door for her; arrived simultaneously, and stood one on either side, as she

passed through. She turned back and smiled at them. "Good—good-night," she said, a little unevenly; and went swiftly down the hall.

The two men sat down to their game again. Louis—who had risen when Hilary went out to bid her an almost formal good-night—attacked the piano with yet madder gaiety. Brent, ostensibly taken up with the strategic placing of a rook, asked himself what in heaven's name Hilary saw in the fellow—a man content to jingle such rot!

Just then Louis drifted into something not rot at all: the *Liebestod* from *Tristan*. Brent's mind halted abruptly. Hilary had used to play that. He told her it was totally unsuited to piano, but she had played it. He had gone with her again and again to hear the opera, to point out to her why it was unsuited to piano; but she had closed her eyes, oblivious of him, and listened: an odd little smile on her lips. He had wondered how one so intelligent in music could take it

so emotionally; somehow he wondered less now. He could hear that Louis was taking it emotionally too—pouring out his soul in it. And Louis had a soul: many people who pour theirs out have not. Brent squirmed; wished to the Lord he could settle to his game. He turned to it resolutely.

"Lass mich sterben, süsse nacht."

The marvellous duet of the lovers on their fatal night swept on to climax; tumult flooding every note. Brent felt stifled. He went to the door and opened it: the night where it showed in patches, through its yellow shawling, was pitch black. Out of it came only the sly rustling of trees. Nash growled to shut that cold air off, for God's sake. The music stopped with a crash.

"I seem to have broken up the symphony," said Brent, with a strained smile. "Sorry, Pembroke, I——"

Louis laughed. "Oh, that! I'm grateful to you—don't apologise. I was getting rather flowery, wasn't I?" His eyes flashed to the

clock above the mantelpiece. "Think I'll go over, for a final chin with Li—perhaps take a stroll round too, before turning in. Good-night."

"Well!" said Nash, when he had gone, "he doesn't what you might call *burden* us with his society, does he? Goes off the minute he can find the limpin'est excuse. And jumpy as a mosquito! Why, this afternoon, when I came in here once, he was sittin' at the desk with his hand on the 'phone, moonin' into space, and when he saw me—dropped the 'phone like a hot cake, and stalked out. Oh, he's a nervous young one."

"He was rather keyed up at dinner, too," said Brent; "the reaction probably from this morning's bad news."

"Well," said Nash deliberately, worrying his cigar from one side of the ragged moustache to the other, "I've always liked Louis. I guess" (with the hint of a faint smile) "it's same with me as with Hal: I can't help likin' him. And I've been thinkin', penned up here—maybe I was wrong the other afternoon.

"If I see that Louis, or any other man, can give Hal what she wants," he told Brent steadily, "I'll help 'em with a divorce or whatever I've got. Lord! I've seen how it is for 'em, locked up like this with us."

Brent swept the chessmen off the board with a rude hand. "That's exactly where you're irrational. Under these conditions any two people who thought they were in love with each other would be sure of it. And would make any other emotionalist about, sure of it," he added.

"Oh," drawled Nash, "I'm an emotionalist, am I? Well, Doc., there are worse things." With a grin, "philosophers, for instance."

Brent laughed, a little testily. "You'll never stop chaffing me about that—or despising me for it, I suppose," he added reflectively.

"For what—tryin' to pull the wool over Hal's eyes, and your own, with a string o' smooth words? Well, no, it don't seem to me exactly a man's game—do you think so yourself, now?" A shade of wistfulness had crept

into the drawling voice, as Nash looked at his friend.

Brent's eyes, under their heavy brows, squinted to meditation. "It seems to you," he realised aloud, "a piece of colossal egotism —and of the meanest type. Well—I *was* egoist with Hilary; but I trusted her to be equally egoist with me."

"Eh?" Nash jerked himself straight in his chair.

"Yes, trusted's the word. You trust a grown man to get a full-sized meal from the table where you're eating too; don't you? If you can't trust a grown woman to do the same, and to make a row if the food doesn't suit her, can you help it if she gets acute indigestion, and goes off to some one else to nurse it for her?

"Trouble is, he went on, "you can't get a woman to tell the truth. She's in such mortal terror of hurting you, that she goes on and on, pretending to think as you do, apparently taking each dose with your own equanimity,

till she comes to one she can't swallow. And then—you may be hashed into mincemeat—she takes to her heels."

"Gad," Nash ejaculated under his breath. "I don't know but that's so. I don't know but that's so, Doc. Only," he added, pugnaciously, "who wants a woman who ain't afraid of anything?"

"Well," said Brent shortly, "if you could make 'em so afraid of self-deception that they'd dare turn the truth on to their impulses occasionally—what I mean about Hilary, is that she never did agree with my philosophy. She was trying constantly to express the agreement she knew I wanted her to feel, which was absurd—and of course, disastrous."

"Humph," Nash said shrewdly, "I'll warrant she didn't leave you in any mincemeat."

"No," Brent returned candidly, "she didn't. But that was only because——"

"Because no woman could. You psychologists want a woman as a kind o' supplement

to the mental machine: to feed you along when you need it, and when you don't—to sit contented in the closet. Now y'know," he said, picking up a shimmering scarf from the table, "Hal ain't exactly meant for a closet!"

"She certainly isn't meant for Pembroke's," retorted Brent with some warmth; "and that's where he'd put her, with the rest of the playthings he's tired of, directly her newness wore off. If you want to help her to *that*——"

"What you'd help her to," said Nash, tersely, "would be some analysis on a platter—and tell her to patch up her heart with it. No"—his voice changed, to an odd quiet—"they've got five days more of this Inquisition to endure, poor children; after that—

"After that, I'll do what I can for 'em," he said.

"And you'll be doing them the greatest injury that you possibly could," burst forth Brent, so vehemently that the other man turned—as he was leaving the room—and stared at him. "They—they aren't suited

to each other," ended the physician (and philosopher) lamely.

"H'm"—Nash looked thoughtful—"I wonder?"

He went on back to the sleeping-porch. From Hilary's door as he passed it, there came no light.

Brent, left alone, chafed at his impetuousness of just now. After all, why the devil did he care—on the other hand, why wasn't he glad that Nash was ready to regularise the union his wife seemed bent upon making? Hadn't that been his (Brent's) vantage of attack, from the first: that Hilary could not stand up under the social opprobrium the affair involved? Now that Nash intended to obviate all that—why should Brent care if Hilary married Pembroke? For that was what it came to, simply. What was Hilary ever to be to Brent, except a rather mixed memory; an interesting object-lesson in femininity?

His restlessness of the early evening increased; he decided to fall in with Louis'

fancy for a stroll. Though the fog outside looked forbidding enough, he was rather exhilarated by the notion of defying it. So he found a heavy raglan, and went out; striking off down the drive at a brisk pace. The fog instantly swallowed him up.

When Louis came back from his long confab with the nurse, the living-room was empty. And from the sleeping-porch came regular though muffled sound of snores. All the bungalow, except the one long, glowing room, was in darkness.

Louis stood considering for a moment; then he crossed the room quickly, and switched off the lights. After that, he sat down and waited. The clock struck ten.

Meanwhile, Brent, in his course of prowling the grounds, was wondering why he did not meet Pembroke. He had paced up and down the drive for half an hour, and was now striding round the path that circled the place. At one end of it was a short cut to the road, which ordinarily tradesmen used, and which

led directly up to the house; but this, with everything now, was shawled about with fog. The yellow murk was like an envelope into which the letter of the world had been put—and lost. Not even the shadows of trees could be seen; but occasionally, through the thick, their branches rustled—with the swift swinging of a native cat: wild-cat, the Occidental describes it. Brent heard the sibilant whine of its call. Then the answer; and the sound of sly creeping through the leaves.

"George!" he muttered, turning his coat collar higher, "what a country! You can polka-dot it with bungalows, but——"

At that moment another sound came to him; a sound that made him stand entirely still, and listen. Again a creeping through the trees, but with it—a low murmur of *human voices;* voices that he knew. His whole brain seemed to freeze to the consistency of ice: rigid, but very clear. Lips grim, he moved along the tall hedge that screened the path from the road.

"Can you see, Harry? Step down a little —so. Now keep your hand on my arm, we'll have to go single file here; and in five minutes we'll be free. *Free*, do you hear, Harry?"

Through the fog an arm of steel shot forward. "You cur!" panted Brent, "you skulking, contemptible cur—so that was what you were up to!"

Louis struck at his head, blindly—hit him. There was a woman's terrified cry and for a breathless instant the two men grappled together, primitively. Then, "There's no use fighting," Brent said curtly; "I can telephone the police in three minutes, and have you stopped before you'd get half a mile down the road. If you've any sanity left, you'll follow me back to the house. Hilary, where are you?"

She came without a word, and stood beside him. "Take my arm," he said briefly; "it's hard to see."

The grim little procession probed its way back to the bungalow; Hilary holding Brent's

arm in the groping, Louis this time walking alone. Arrived at the house, "Put this in your room," Brent told Hilary, giving her the little bag he had been carrying; "and take off your things. Then come back here."

She disappeared, with the bag. And in the blinding light Brent had turned on, he and Louis regarded each other, face to face. At which moment, in the doorway appeared Nash Comer, looking at them speculatively, and twisting the frogs of his pink pyjamas.

"Seem's though there's some row on," he commented mildly.

"There is," said Brent, through set lips. "If you'll go back to bed, we'll settle it."

"Why sure—sure, Doc.; so long as you don't wake me up again, bangin' round the house. Hullo!" catching sight of a light down the hall, "Hal's up too. So it was a three-cornered row?" he asked swiftly.

"Yes!" said Brent.

"Humph—they generally are," Mr. Comer reflected. "All right—I'm off. Only don't

keep Hal up till morning," he added, in a different voice.

When he had gone, "So you thought you'd play at that game!" Brent faced Louis again with eyes in which everything but contempt was frozen over. "Do you realise that——"

"Don't be melodramatic," begged Louis wearily. "Nothing's happened, so what's the use?" He sank down into a chair, seeming to collapse within himself. His eyes burned out of a quite colourless face, his clothes were torn, his hair dishevelled. Hilary, as she came in and silently sat beside him, thought he looked ghastly.

Brent turned to her. "Have you any idea of what you escaped just now?" he asked her curiously. "Do you know what Pembroke was leading you into?"

"Oh, sit down, Brent," urged Louis lifelessly; "you never loved a woman, so what do you know about it?"

"Nothing perhaps," Brent retorted, continuing to stand. "At least not enough to

expose her to the filth of a public pest-house, or worse still of a Shanghai prison."

"What do you mean?" Hilary spoke for the first time; ghostly pale. "If they had found us out, would they have——?"

"*When* they had found you out—there's no if about it—they would have arrested you for breaking the health laws; and if you were lucky, you'd have been sent to the city quarantine station. Do you know what that is?" he demanded; and, turning to Louis, "do you? It's a broken-down hovel on the edge of town, where the vileness, the—we won't go into that. I've described it vividly enough to the city health commission. *That* would have been if you'd been lucky."

"And if not?" whispered Hilary, in a voice that shook.

"If not—you'd have been put in the criminal ward for contagious diseases; which," grimly, "no one has ever dared describe. And you," he blazed at Louis, "you never thought of that, I suppose? It never occurred

to you that in a port where a case of cholera has been discovered, every ship, every train is ransacked for possible carriers of the contagion? This woman you *love*, you would have led into these unspeakable things as lightly as into a ball-room! God deliver me from such love!"

Hilary turned towards Louis. Slowly, and with a dynamic question in her eyes. The question grew, as for the first time in their experience, he appeared to her—under Brent's towering rage—insignificant. Mere shattered good looks, beside impregnable dignity.

"Did you not?" she asked, almost woodenly. "Did you not think of that?"

Louis drew a great breath, but he met her eyes without wavering. "No," he said—and dignity did come to him then—"I thought only of being with you."

Brent's stern features softened, at the look that came over her face. "The main thing," he said, less harshly, to Louis, "is for you to understand that for the future—until these

five days are up—you are not to repeat this mad experiment."

"Oh, you needn't work yourself up," said Louis dully; "I'll not try it again."

Hilary, an odd finality hardening her soft voice, said "no." And walking over to the desk, picked up a letter that was lying on it. "I left this note for Nash," she explained to Brent, simply.

Brent had been about to sit down. He straightened suddenly. "You—were—leaving that note for—your husband?" he repeated, gazing at her as though he really saw her for the first time in his life. What he saw was the vision of Nash, tugging at the ragged moustache, and saying: "I'll do what I can for 'em!"

"You—you—what are you made of?" Brent's low tone to her was more scathing than all his fury against Louis. "You marry a man, one in five million; you take his care, his goods, his unceasing thought for four years. Then you decide that another man pleases

you better: you go to him, as calmly, as self-approvingly as to church on Sunday. And when by a quirk of circumstance your husband finds you there, in the man's house, you say: 'I am here. I am going to stay here.' Not another word."

"But"—Hilary stood thunderstruck.

"Wait. That man, your husband, instead of telling you to go to—the place you were headed for, receives your bland announcement without a word. More!—he effaces himself at every conceivable turn, so that you and your lover may suffer as little as possible. He"—Brent's voice was disjointed, almost inaudible—"to-night he said he had been mistaken the other day—in refusing to give you the one thing else he could: divorce. He said: 'they've got five days more to endure, poor children: *after that I'll do what I can for them!*' And you—you, ten minutes before, had been arranging to leave him a note!"

Hilary had sunk, almost fallen, into a chair. Her look of the child had dropped from her

—forever; it was a woman, white and aware, who fixed her eyes fascinatedly on Brent.

Louis had sprung out of his lethargy, to stand by Brent, ready to do murder. But the man glaring down at Hilary did not even see him.

"From beginning to end," he continued relentlessly, "you've treated the making and breaking of marriage like the making or breaking of an engagement to lunch. You've used it to serve your own ends, and when it didn't, you've placidly chucked it. You——"

"Yes, John," said Hilary quietly, "you taught me to."

"Ah!" cried Louis, sitting down again.

Brent gave a sort of gasp. "What—what do you mean?" he stammered.

"I mean that you," said she clearly, "told me that marriage was an expedient—that people who cared more for the general opinion than for their own freedom, took to it as an expedient; and discarded it when it no longer served as such. When I was younger than I

am now, you impressed me with your disappointment that I was not strong enough to be 'free'—you made me feel, though you may not have known it, my inferiority at not being able to look at these things in a casual light.

"Well, John," said Hilary, with her woman's eyes, "from that day, I have been trying to look at them casually. It seems I have succeeded better than my teacher."

There was a moment of entire silence. Brent, staring at her like one in a trance, had dropped down finally into a chair. At the end of the long moment, Hilary added, "I realise what you say about Nash, I will—make it up to Nash."

"Harry!" cried Louis fearfully.

"Will you, Hilary?" Brent spoke at last, not quite steadily. "If you will, you—it'll be the most generous of coals you can heap on my head." And still staring at her, with no further word of goodnight, he went out.

VIII

"NASH," said Louis diffidently, "may I speak to you a moment?"

Both the diffidence and Louis' expression—as Nash jerked round in the window-seat to look at him—were so astounding as to indicate revolution of some sort. "Why sure, Louis," said the older man, making room; "it's what I've been tryin' to get you to do for three days."

"I know it." Though Louis sat down, he did not look at Nash, but straight ahead of him. "I—I tried to stand you out, but—it's no use. We've got to talk, you and I; there's no other way."

Nash shifted his cigar. "Talkin's hard," he observed, "when it comes to the woman."

"That's just it!" Now Louis turned to

him eagerly. "She *is* the woman, Nash—so help me God! There never was another—only flirtations."

"What about Betty?" asked Nash, regarding him. The two had the living-room to themselves, and the sun streamed in there this morning, broad-rayed and glorious after the fog of yesterday; turning Louis' many-paned room to a palace of light, touching its detail caressingly.

"Well, I was rather—rather engaged to her," Louis said, speaking of Betty; "but she broke it off. As long ago as last spring. She——"

"She broke it off about two months after Hal came to town, didn't she? Humph! you said yesterday—when we were talkin' about riding—Betty's a plucky little thing."

"She is. But it wasn't pluck, that; it was sheer inclination."

Nash took his cigar out of his mouth. "Pluck—inclination—son," he said, "those

are two things that a good woman interchanges till even she don't know the difference between 'em. How should you ? "

"Well, I know in this case," insisted Louis stubbornly. "Because Betty told Harry that she knew it had all been a mistake: that we had never really loved each other, only drifted together for want of somebody else. And a woman always tells the truth to another woman."

"Oh," said Nash, "*does* she ! "

"Yes. And I was telling you—I've not played round out here, like the rest of the chaps. You know me, and Shanghai, well enough to know that."

"I do," fired Nash, "or d'you think I'd have played my hand in this game the way I have ? By God, if you'd been the Shanghai 'average man,' I'd have seen you'n Hal dead before me, long ago ! Though I'm not for melodrama either—that you ought to have discovered."

"Yes. I—I dare say there were times when

you could have made a nasty scene if you'd wanted to."

"Were there!" Nash threw up his hands. "Say, Louis," he drawled, "if you hadn't been so all-fired clumsy, you might o' had that scene, yet. 'Twas because you proved your greenness, every hour o' the day, that I trusted you—to let me in on the climax. You did too, all right."

Louis bit his lip. "Of course, if it's a joke to you"—he began stiffly.

Nash shot his cigar into the grate. "*Joke?*" he repeated, slowly, and bending over till his brown eyes peered into Louis' on a level. "When you've been married to a woman for four years—a woman like Hal—and another man comes along and takes her from you, tell *him* if it's a joke."

"I beg your pardon," said Louis, abashed. "I didn't know—it was like that."

"'Course you didn't. Till you've lived with a woman, you wouldn't. Listen, Louis: if Betty Fayerweather had had black hair

instead o' red, and if her eyes'd been like violets in spring, 'stead o' plain brown; if she'd had skin so clear you could see her plucky little soul shinin' through; believe me——"

"Oh, I know!" Louis smiled bitterly. "You think it was only the 'bone and the hank of hair' I wanted—that I want, for the life of me! You think—but what I started to explain," he went on more quietly, "was how I came to care for Harry, and why I kept on coming to your house as your friend. It seems, on the surface, a cad's trick."

"Only in story-books," returned Nash, smiling a little; "where men and women live, it seems inevitable."

"Anyhow," said Louis passionately, "I couldn't help it. I *had* to come. I"—he turned abruptly towards the window for a moment. And it occurred to Nash that the man's beautiful head was none the less a man's; that against the dusky purple of the window hangings, the bold line of it showed

even more pronounced than the blond colour. And it was a man's voice, though hesitating, that continued: "I suppose I can never make you understand, but——"

"Try me," said Nash, lighting another cigar.

"Well, from the first there was music——"

"And I can't whistle a tune!"

"And riding—you hadn't time to ride in the mornings; and then the Ballad Concerts, and the Domino Club rehearsals, and——"

"Shucks," Nash interrupted, coughing violently over a thick stream of smoke, "you needn't hunt for any more—reasons. I never had to. First of all, you were both children."

Louis straightened.

"Beautiful, fascinatin' children, both of you. That riles you, don't it? When you're forty-three you'll pay somebody to tell it to you—and believe 'em. Well—let reasons go. There was somethin' in your mind when you said you wanted to speak to me—somethin' special. What was it?"

Louis flushed red. "I dare say you guessed," he said, speaking difficultly, "Brent gave me a dressing-down last night."

"Humph! Doc.?"

"Yes. I must say, where Harry's concerned I think he hasn't much room to talk; but what he did say, about you and your attitude to—us, made me realise I'd got to have this talk with you; to—explain."

"Louis"—the other man's voice altered, to take on a tone Louis heard for the first time—"explanations are for drawing-rooms; not for the place where a man's slippin' round in his heart's blood. Somebody's had to be spilt, and you can't say I've whined that I'm it. But—don't 'explain' to me; if you want to talk about the future, that's another thing."

"Oh," muttered Louis, "very well. Er—Brent intimated that you—that you'd changed your mind about a—divorce."

"Yes," said Nash, smoking steadily. "I have."

"But Harry," burst forth Louis, eager now

to state his extraordinary case, "*now* Harry won't hear of it. She and Brent had a great row, and Harry showed Brent up for the inconsistent hypocrite he is; and then—at the end—turned round and said she realised the truth of all he'd said, and that she would stay with you!"

"Ah!" But the sharp exclamation held no triumph. What Nash added was, slowly, "Doc. seems to have influence with Hal."

"Oh," said Louis scornfully, "he can talk. Women always go under to talk."

Nash fixed him with a look he did not care to meet—after the first instant. "The woman you are speaking of," said he, "is still my wife. If what you have to say of her is only——"

"No, no," Louis interrupted hurriedly; "for heaven's sake don't be angry—not you too."

"Oh," said Nash drily, "of course not me. Well," he added, "if what you want me to do is to—ahem!—persuade Hal to accept a divorce from me, don't worry. I'll do it."

"Will you?" A tumult of relief flooded Louis' handsome face. "Nash, that's bully of you! It—that's really one of the things one calls great. *Thank you!*"

"Don't mention it," said Nash.

"You see how it is—Brent's got her all stirred up about her 'duty' and all that, and she's ready to make an insane sacrifice of herself, and ruin things for everybody."

"I see," said Nash—coughing again. "She mustn't be allowed to do that."

"No, of course not, must she? But how sporting of you to see! I say, Nash"—impulsively (and somewhat shamefacedly) Louis rose—"I want to apologise for the childish way I've treated you since we've been shut up here. It wasn't generous, it wasn't a man. I——"

Nash waved him aside. "A man," said he, looking at Louis through half-closed, speculative eyes, "is so many things; and—many men—Gad, that's true!—are so few things! Forget it, Louis."

Louis laughed out of sheer sense of well-being. "You're a brick," he declared enthusiastically. "And I know I've been a frightful bear. I hope *you'll* forget it."

Nash rose to his stumpy brown height. "I will," he promised, holding out his hand.

But when a few minutes later, Hilary came into the room as Louis left it, "Hal," Nash asked her bluntly, "is that the man you think will make you happy?"

And she, with that new look of hers this morning that he could not fathom, answered as bluntly: "I don't know."

"Good," said Nash; "then we've something to start from. Sit down a minute, won't you? If you'd nothin' else you wanted to do?"

"All I wanted was to talk to you," she said quietly.

"Good!" Nash repeated. Then, "Does it strike you, Hal," he went on, when he had placed some cushions for her, and sat down opposite, "that this is the first time we've

ever had a talk together—a real talk, I mean? Not since we've been married—four years—have you'n I talked of anything more important than railroad tickets and whom to ask to dinner."

"It did strike me—last night," said Hilary, her voice not quite steady. "It's rather—rather odd, isn't it?"

"You tried to talk—that first day here, but I saw how 'twas for you, and I cut you short. Since then—I guess you haven't felt like it, eh? You couldn't quite——"

"I did feel like it," she broke in, a bit breathlessly, "I wanted to talk. But Louis made me promise I wouldn't. And now——"

"Now——"

"I'm breaking my promise," she said, colour mounting; "I can't help it, it's right."

They, too, sat in the window-seat—at least Hilary sat in it, the sun pouring in on her black hair, to make it colourful, and lighting the new wistful shadows in her face, almost to the glory

of the supernatural. Nash and his short squareness occupied a chair. He looked tired to-day and old; his leathery brown face seemed to sag into his neck, and he coughed continuously.

"I want to say to you, Hal," he proceeded gently, "what you already know, I guess: that I love you better than anything I could ever get out o' this world, and that it'd be hurtin' me a lot more than I ever want to be hurt, to keep you from any happiness you could get—from me or anybody else. If you want Louis, my dear," he told her quietly, "I want you to have him."

Hilary tried to speak, but could only utter an inarticulate little sound; and set her trembling lips determinedly.

"Why, I know," he spoke for her, gazing straight into her eyes. "When you met me, you were so tired of knockin' about by yourself—being battered round among that student crowd and their *philosophies*—you just took to marriage with me, like a worn-out child to a

big easy-chair. And I did make it kind o' an easy-chair for you, didn't I, Hal?"

She dashed away two tears. "Oh, you did, you did!"

"And then when we'd been married awhile, and came out here, why—you didn't need the easy-chair any longer, and I—Hal, don't you think I ever had any dreams about your bein' in love with me? I only prayed the Lord, thankin' Him with every breath I drew that you'd been able to marry me at all, I only prayed that you'd be just—just fond of me a little. That my roughness and my swear words, and my mis'able cigars wouldn't utterly disgust you: that you'd be willin' just to go on being my wife."

There was silence in the glowing room for an instant. Then Nash added, "That couldn't be. You met Louis; and the minute I saw you together I knew—why shucks! Look at these hands"—he spread them out disdainfully—"look at me, all of me, beside Louis."

"Don't," she begged, covering her eyes—"it's cruel! Oh, Nash——"

"Now don't you go gettin' any silly notions o' injustice in your head," he frowned at her severely; "I guess when it comes to judgin' horseflesh, or pickin' a brand o' tea-leaves, I can give Louis a few points for his beautiful eyes. But as for whistlin' the Blue Danube waltz—Lord! or readin' Omar Khay—what's-his-name, or tellin' a Corot from a summer squash—Hal, my dear," he finished contemptuously, "I'm about as good as the next farmer at those tricks."

"Don't you see how you're making me feel?" she implored, beseechingly. "Don't you see how wretchedly small and silly all those things——"

"No," he interrupted, "no. Don't you make that mistake, or think I'm makin' it. The things are silly, maybe yes; but the fact that's back o' the things—birth, breeding, whatever you choose to call it—that you're either born with or *ain't*," said Nash grimly, "that's not silly. It's tragedy," said he.

"And when Louis, who had it, came along, and with everything else into the bargain, do you think I thought it was silly in you to see it? All I felt hard about—and that did come down on me, Hal—was that you didn't come out and tell me about it. I'd always tried to treat you on the square, and I thought—why, honey, don't you see"—he leaned forward, and timidly touched one of her slender hands—"don't you see how simple it would all have been if we'd had this talk two months ago?"

Hilary gazed at him wonderingly. "We thought," she faltered—and the wonder was at herself—"yes, I thought too, you wouldn't understand!"

"Well," he drew a deep breath, but tightened his tentative hold of her fingers, "now you know I do. And you know it's for you to say the word. From this time forward, you're the boss. If you want to marry Louis——"

"I think I want," said Hilary almost

reverently, "only to stay with you—if you'll let me?"

"Let you?" he fairly shouted. Then, as instantly very quiet, "no, honey—that won't do. You're all stirred up now; I've worked on your feelings—though God knows I didn't start to. And, really," he watched her closely, "you love Louis."

"I—don't know," she said slowly. "Last night—something happened last night that—I thought I loved him so that nothing could ever shake me," she concluded desperately; "but last night—I *was* shaken."

Nash's soul sent up a tumultuous hallelujah.

"And when you've once felt that about a person," she continued, locking and interlocking her fingers, "that sickening sweep of distrust, even though it never comes again—but oh, I think it must come again!" cried Hilary, stating her whole fear and her agony. "It would never have come at all, if—if there hadn't been something there that would make it come again—and again."

Nash was silent. In the face of truth, there is nothing to say.

"So if you'll let me"—she offered her hands, with a smile he never should forget—"I'll come back. And on Saturday—we'll go home."

He shook his head, speechless; gripping her hands till the rings bit the soft flesh. But she said, "yes, yes!" And then left him—quite brusquely.

Only after she had gone did he notice that Brent had come in.

"Well, Doc."—Nash tried vainly to subdue the turbulence in his voice—"what you lookin' so low about?"

"Nothing." Brent came and flung himself on the couch. "Do I look low?"

"We-ell," nobody'd mistake you for the statue o' Hilarity. What's the matter? Philosophy runnin' short?"

Brent turned on him. "That's a word," he declared, "I wish never to hear again!"

Nash stared. "Say," he said, "do you

know when you're mad you're good-lookin' ? It's a fact, by Zedekiah ! "

Brent gave a queer, short laugh. " A fact then that does me precious little good. I don't ' get mad ' often."

" Well, I'd cultivate it," said Nash earnestly ; " makes a thunderin' handsome man of you. Say," he added, jerking his thumb in the direction of Ping's quarters, " things pretty darn serious over there this morning, what ? "

Brent nodded. " Worse and worse. Li signalled to me with his whistle just now, and asked me to telephone Sanders. But while we were talking Sanders came ; I'm waiting now for him to disinfect."

" Look here," he observed suddenly, glancing at Nash, " you don't look any too fit, yourself. What's the matter with you ? "

" Me ? " said Nash scornfully. " Pooh—nothin'."

" H'm—well, you look—come over here. Stick out your tongue—throat sore ? "

" Nope," Nash returned mendaciously.

"It isn't? Well, it ought to be. Stop smoking. I told you the first day we were out here, I wouldn't give ten cash for your resistance at any time. And just now——" he broke off abruptly.

"Eh?" Nash blew a thick stream of smoke from his very sore throat, at that minute. "Just now—what?"

"It behoves us each to keep well, that's all," Brent returned shortly. "You go back and lie down—get a good nap before tiffin, do you understand?"

"Well, maybe I will," Nash agreed, with amazing docility. "But don't you think there's anything the matter with *me*," he called back belligerently from the door, "'cause there ain't. I'm just a little tired, that's all."

"'Just a little tired'"—the jadedness that had been in Brent's face when he came in gave place to a dawning anxiety. "Just a little——"

Sanders called to him, then, and he went out on the porch. He did not tell Sanders that Nash felt just a little tired.

IX

"HARRY"—Louis called softly, coming in from outside, "Har-ry"——

He looked for her among the flowers and dazzling blue of the dining-room—in their favourite bow-window; but he found her in the kitchen, her flushed face bent above the fire.

"What in the world"—he began impetuously. Then, "you adorable stubbornness! How many times have you to be told that you're *not* to fuss round out here? Take off that ridiculous pinafore, and go back among the roses, where you belong! I'll get lunch. But first——"

"Really, Louis," she said, stirring busily, "I'd rather finish. I'm quite enjoying myself."

He laughed impatiently. "You're about

as hot and uncomfortable as you could well be. Come "—taking the spoon from her hands imperiously—" I want to tell you about——"

But Hilary did not budge. " I am going to get lunch," she said with gentle determination. " And—I don't need any help, Louis."

" Well ! " Louis looked at her, dumbfounded. " You *are* obstinate ! "

She smiled at him, over her pink pinafore. " Am I ? You see, you three have made a lady of me, all this time ; and—and really I'm not a lady at all. I love to fuss round the kitchen, and get hot and mussy as you call it—only I'd forgotten how I loved it."

Louis murmured something incredulous, and wholly indignant ; and sat down on a kitchen stool. " I didn't even know you knew how to cook," he said resentfully, " till the other morning."

" Oh yes," she stirred on, " I kept house for my father. Though that has been rather a long time, now. Er—don't you think you'd

be more comfortable in the other room, Louis ? "

" No, I don't," returned Louis emphatically. " I want to talk to you, and you've avoided me all morning."

" I thought," said Hilary quietly, " we said all we had to say to one another, last night."

" Well, I didn't," he declared. " We were wrought up to a pitch, last night, anyhow—half out of our minds. That blustering Brent—besides," he broke off eagerly, " I've had a talk with Nash this morning. So have you, haven't you ? "

" Yes," said Hilary.

" Well, what did he say ? Did he tell you he'd let you get the divorce ? Is it all arranged ? "

She turned and looked at him directly. And though she saw the handsome face with new eyes, to-day, she could not quite control her voice as she answered, " It is arranged that I go back with Nash, on Saturday—for good."

"That you—the double-faced bounder!" cried Louis. "He promised me he'd persuade you to arrange a divorce! And——"

Hilary gave an exclamation. "Nash *promised* you he would *persuade* me to—Louis, Louis!" She was gazing at him as at a stranger.

"Well, what's the matter? You've been begging all along for us to have it out with Nash, so this morning I did. We went over the whole thing, including Brent's bullying of last night. I told Nash about it, and what you'd said about staying with him. Of course he saw the insane sacrifice of that; he *said* he'd make you see it. Evidently," said Louis bitterly, "he changed his mind!"

Hilary threw back her head. "If he did, I made him," she said, her cheeks as pink as her pinafore. "It's I who have changed, Louis—can't you see?—Not Nash."

"Oh, I see well enough!" burst forth Louis. "And I see too, that if this confounded meddler Brent hadn't interfered, everything would have come right. Look here, Harry,"

persuasively, "you didn't really believe all that cock-and-bull story Brent gave us?—about the prison and things?"

She turned away to the stove; he could not see the expression on her face. "Yes, I did believe it," she said. "So did you—at the time. We believed every word he told us, and believe it now. We were mad to think of what we did, Louis. And if we had actually carried it out——" a shudder ran along her slender frame. She hurried from the room with some dishes.

When she came back, Louis met her with stern eyes, and a face from which the youth momentarily had fled. "There's only one explanation to all this," he said, catching her wrists before she could evade him: "you don't love me. You never have loved me. Your coming here was just what that canting psychologist said: an impulse, and one that you jolly well regret now. Well! I hope for the sake of the next man for whom you have *an impulse*, that you learn to tell it from the

real thing, before matters have gone as far as they have now!"

"Louis!" she cried in a low voice. Every particle of colour had left her face.

"Yes," he went on, his words stumbling over each other, "you're awfully upset by what Brent says to you, and you're no end cut up by the wrong you think you've done Nash; but as to what you've done—what you're doing—to me, that hasn't even occurred to you. I'm in the way of your duty—that you take from Brent like a pill, and swallow; so exit Louis! And a nuisance he was to get rid of, wasn't he?"

"Louis, Louis!" Under the whipping words, she looked at him, quivering. "If I were really what you paint," she said slowly, "I should be the most horrible creature alive." And then, more slowly still, "Perhaps I am horrible—perhaps it's true, and I am the thing you suggest: a bundle of impulses, unordered, ruinous; working havoc in the lives I touch. I don't know. I don't know myself at all.

I think I never even looked at myself—inside of me, until last night. I simply did things, or I didn't do them—that's impulse, isn't it? Yes,"—she put her hands up to her temples, and pushed the hair back from them, with rigid fingers—"I see now. I've been not wicked, but worse than wicked: I've been shallow. And you—the people I pretended to love—have had to suffer."

"Harry, Harry!" He looked at her drawn face, frightened; all his anger evaporated, under the white flame of her own self-accusation. "Don't talk so! You're none of those things—not one. I've been a brute and a beast, and you shall do exactly as you like—I'll not say another word. Oh, my little white saint," he implored, as still her lips kept that stony line, "look at me, forgive me—don't you see, now I understand?"

She did look at him then, and a sudden light of realisation entered her stricken eyes. "You don't understand, no," she said clearly. "You think of me one minute as a doll—

a charming doll, of course!—with caprices to be indulged; the next minute, as a saint in a shrine, to be worshipped. I'm neither. I'm a woman—and I've to get lunch. Will you leave me to do it, please, Louis?"

Louis stiffened, throughout his magnificent height. "Oh, very well," he said coldly; "if you persist in being so absolutely strange!" And stalked out, casting chill displeasure behind him.

Hilary sat down for a moment, among Ping's spotless pots and pans, and buried her face in the pink pinafore. But it was not over Louis that her heart knew that sickening mistrust; it was—"Oh, what am I? What *am* I?" she moaned, rocking back and forth on the little stool. She was the child who had grown up overnight; and she asked the all-terrible question, for the first time, at twenty-six!

"Perhaps if I knew, I should be still more afraid to look," she murmured piteously; "but I must find out. I must! Or—this

way, it's chaos. Not only for me, but for every one. And——"

"For the love of Heaven, Hilary, what's burning?" A black head was poked in at the window, Brent's abrupt laugh rang out—and Hilary jumped to her feet.

"Muffins, and—and my self-respect, and a few other things," she said, laughing shakily. "Come in, won't you—and assist at the cremation?" They were the first words that came into her head, but even as she said them it occurred to her that he *could* assist: John, who knew her like a slide under his microscope, could tell her what she was.

"H'm"—he was in the kitchen now, and taking a smoking pan out of her hands—"and they would probably have been *excellent* muffins."

"I let them burn," said she with an oblique glance at him, "while I examined my mental workings. Set the pan outside, John, and we'll bake a fresh batch. But we must hurry—it's nearly one."

Brent disposed of her charred effort, and came back, to find her ladling creamy dough into a fresh pan. What he intended to say, was, "Give me something to do;" what he said, was, "that pink thing's more becoming even than the 'old tea-gown,' Hilary."

Hilary dropped her spoon, and stared. "That—that's the first compliment you ever paid me," she stammered, "and I was just about to borrow your brain!"

"Well, it's still intact," he retorted, "though I did lose grip on my congenital incivility for thirty seconds! I should think, though," he added, in an altered voice, "you'd got a brain of your own, to answer your questions. It seemed to be working fairly clearly last night."

Hilary selected a new spoon, and went on with her ladling—very carefully. They had had no conversation together since last night. "It never worked at all till last night," she said, after a significant moment. "Your prodding woke it up; and John"—

her voice trembled a little—"the awakening is—is rather awful."

He took a quick step towards her. "I know, poor—look here," he asked impatiently, "can't you give me something to do with my hands—er, while we talk, I mean? They're just lying round loose—it makes me restless."

She opened her eyes at him, in a way that made him more restless still. "You may put these in," she said, handing him the muffin-pan, "and then you may make the salad-dressing. You used to do that very nicely."

He shut the oven door, and looked up at her. "Those Sunday evenings were fun, weren't they?" he said, in a voice gentler than his usual crisp tones. "Poor old Frau Tatler's dead now, and I suppose all the old crowd have drifted away. We had some good parties."

"Yes," said Hilary. They looked at each other silently.

Then Brent took a bowl, and began violently

to beat up oil and vinegar. "What about those questions?" he asked casually. "Or was it only one?"

She stood quite still, for a moment, thinking. "It was a thousand rolled into one," she said finally. "But first I must tell you: I talked with Nash this morning."

"Ah!" said Brent.

"Yes. That is, he did most of the talking —he seemed to be able to put things so much clearer than I. Oh, John"—standing there in the little kitchen, Hilary's face was transfigured—"he's splendid! I never knew him before. He——"

"He's better than splendid," Brent said succintly; "he's sensible. What did he say to you?"

"He said—he'd realised the whole thing from the beginning—and he'd realised the reasons. He showed them to me—I'd never thought of them. But he insists I shan't go back with him—I think I know why now"—an ominous little gleam shone in Hilary's

eye: "Louis had got him to promise he'd persuade me to arrange a divorce!"

"The young chicken-liver!" cried Brent, threatening to upset the salad-dressing over himself and Hilary at once.

"I told Louis what I thought about it," she said steadily; and of course he'd heard me say last night what I felt about making it up to Nash. But he retaliates by saying that then I'll be hurting *him*—oh, you don't know how he made it sound——"

"I can imagine," said Brent disgustedly.

"Anyhow," she went on more and more difficultly, "he showed me myself in a new light—as a person spreading suffering and disaster, without a thought beyond what for the moment she wants to do; and—and now I don't know what to do. I don't know what I am—I don't know anything."

"Bully for you!" Brent banged down the salad bowl, jumped up, and grasped both her hands. "It's the best starting-point there is," he said.

"But," she protested, taken aback, "I want to know. I want you to tell me."

He dropped her hands, and his probing eyes searched hers with an expression almost wistful—yes, Brent. "You want me—after what you told me last night," he said haltingly; "you ask *me* to direct you—again?"

"Yes, John." She looked back at him, unwavering.

"I don't understand. It's due to my teaching"—his words came in jerks—"that you got yourself into—the mess you're in now. And——"

"And now," she smiled a little, "I ask you to teach me how to get out. Is it so illogical after all?"

He sank down on his stool again. "What else are we having for lunch?" he demanded feebly.

"Chops," said Hilary. And then they both laughed, and for some reason suddenly felt very comfortable and at home together.

While Hilary was ruthlessly burning her

hands over the broiler, he said in his old keen manner: "As a matter of fact, Hilary, it's vitally essential that you do what you want to do, in this case—if I gave a different impression last night, I was wrong. The thing is to be *sure* what you want to do—and then do it; no looking back. Only remember it's the long view you want. That's where my philosophy tricked you and me both: it wouldn't stand prolongation. Make sure that your desire—whichever it turns out to be—will stand it."

She look round, a little bewildered. "You mean——?"

"I mean"—he smiled acutely—"that this is, as you said that first evening, an emotional complex. Nothing you can *think* will alter it from being that. You can think you want to chuck Pembroke and stick to Nash; and unless you actually do want it, you'll only succeed—with the best will in the world—in making yourself and Nash and Pembroke thoroughly wretched."

"But you said—you wanted me to make it up to Nash."

"By treating him as a human being, with a right to consideration and frank discussion; not as an inconvenient piece of furniture to be kicked out of the way. That's what I meant, when I exploded last night. You saw the point, and you've done a right-about-face—you've made a meeting-place for Nash and yourself, to work things out."

"And the next thing——?" she asked breathlessly.

"As I see it," he said deliberately, "with Nash ready to take the step he suggests, everything rests now on one question: do you, or do you not, love Pembroke? Taking the long view, that is, will you love him—a year, six years, from now?"

She started to speak; shut her lips tightly again.

"It is a question," he said, finding it somehow difficult to look at her, "that calls for consideration—much deeper than you have

already given it. And neither I nor anyone can help you answer. I can only suggest to you points of view."

Hilary turned the chops, with a nervous little motion. "Yes, please—that's what I want you to do. And you don't know how you've helped me, already. It—it was like being shut in a tight, black box, with only myself to hear me call; and now you're there, on the other side, and I believe you're going to get me out."

"You will get yourself out," he said, vigorously.

"Not alone. We've proved that already. But I'm not going to be wholly a weakling, either. You say"—the grey eyes raised to his, slowly—"that everything rests now on one question; for me the question is this: *can* love endure, sturdy, after it has been swept by a wave of—no, not doubt, of *un-respect?* Can it? Answer me, John: I'm showing you the linings of things. And I know," she added, a sudden steadfast light coming

into her face, "that whatever you are not, you are just—and that you speak the truth."

He looked at her, dumb. This was not a woman, asking for re-assurance; it was a fellow-being seeking truth. And yet, perversely, never as in that first appeal as a fellow-being, had Hilary so appealed to Brent as a woman. For the first time in his life he doubted his ability of justice in answering her; he knew he wanted so to answer her in one way. And why? What was there in him that caught suddenly at the helplessness of her—ignored suddenly her rights? From out of nowhere, there came to him a picture of her as he had seen her one night standing in her door: her black hair unbound, falling in misty veils to hide the blue-green robe she wore; and her face—as it came back to him now, screened, indefinable, it was the face of Mystery—beckoning, luring. It was more wonderful than all the truth he had garnered at its price. And it was gone! It had passed

into the questioning face of Hilary Comer, wanting advice about her lover.

"I can't answer you, Hilary," he said stolidly; "I don't know."

Hilary almost dropped the sizzling meat she was turning into a platter. "You—don't know?" she echoed. That everything else should be shaken—inextricable, seemed only consistent; with the confused fantasy life had been for the last few days. But that her spiritual Gibraltar should totter—flagrantly confess himself unsure: this was monstrous! She showed her incredulity in every tone of her voice.

"No, I don't know," he repeated. Adding, with a grim smile, "love, and its ramifications, is a subject in which you're better read than I. Shall I carry in these chops?"

"Yes, please," she answered dazedly; feeling, all at once, more utterly alone than she had been before his appearance. And it was such a simple question she had asked him; for him, she thought, it would be so easy.

The kitchen was hot, and she opened the door. Beyond it by only a few steps lay the broad chalk line. Hilary leaned her head against the door, and gazed at it: she had all but left it, last night—*for what?* Just then a sound came to her, that drove all other things from her mind.

As Brent returned from the dining-room, he found her holding to the door with all her strength—a huddled, white-faced heap of shaking nerves. "Do you hear—do you hear?" she cried, convulsively, "I opened the door, just for a minute, and now—that sound!—I can't go away."

From beyond the Line came long strangled groans; broken by hoarse muttering, and every now and then a wild, guttural cry. Brent himself lost colour slightly.

"You *must* come away," he said, authoritatively, drawing her inside, and closing the door with a bang. "And you're not to open it again, or to go near that place. All fever illnesses have phases that——"

"But I kept thinking"—she fairly collapsed into a chair, quivering—"if it *had* touched us—any of us! John, John, when we planned last night, I didn't realise. The danger—I——"

"Of course you didn't," he said tersely. And then, more abruptly still, "I'm going to say something wholly illogical, but it's true: I'll never cease to be glad that you planned last night, Hilary, and that you all but carried out the plan. For if you hadn't, you'd probably never have shown me myself for the conceited, futile ass I've been."

"John!" she said, imploringly.

"Now don't spoil it by having scruples," he retorted. "It was a sublime vengeance, and you took it at the keenest moment. Keener even than you knew, for I'd been dissecting you to Comer, just before—handing you out to him in small bits; and you came along half an hour later, and *shredded* me. For my superiority of all these years you punished me last night, Hilary, and—I thank you!"

He was smiling at her, he thrust out his hand. But she saw all at once the little lines of weariness round his eyes; and the stone that his memory had been, dissolved—vanished away. She gave him both her hands.

"The muffins will burn again," she murmured, with an April smile.

"Let them!" said Brent, with a new and magnificent recklessness.

And it was as they stood there, hands joined, gazing deep at each other, that Nash came to the door. "H'm!"—something odd, acute flashed over his face, before he gave that dry cough. "Say, Doc., do you think you could come and have a look at my throat? I feel pretty hot, and as though—well, maybe I'm goin' to have a chill."

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X

BRENT threw the paper down on the breakfast-table, where Louis lingered, smoking. "Well!" he said, "have you seen that?"

"What?" said Louis, sullenly. Sullenness was his part these days, in place of the savagery of at first, and the brief period of high spirits which had withered away since Nash's illness —and Hilary's oblivious solicitude.

"Look on the first page"—Brent opened the paper, with suppressed excitement. "'Manager Biehler, of the Tivoli Opera Company, tells of a genius in our midst. Impresario, former concert manager for Hilary Temple, now Mrs. Nash Comer. Hopes to persuade beautiful virtuoso to give concert here. Mrs. Comer still in quarantine at the Pembroke bungalow.' . . . . Well, what do you think of it, eh?"

"I think it's a piece of damned impertinence!" cried Louis. "The publicity of it! The cheapness, the—the daring to suggest she'd give a concert! By Jove, if I were out of here, I'd——"

"Well," said Brent, taking a chair and a cigarette, "I dare say she will—give a concert. Why shouldn't she?"

"Oh, certainly—why shouldn't she, indeed! indeed!"

"Do her good, after being shut up here—take her mind off things. I approve it thoroughly, myself."

Louis glared at him. The calm arrogance of the man: "I approve it"! "Well, *I* don't," he retorted. "It's beastly vulgar; and I hope to goodness Harry'll let it alone."

"Of course you do. You want her to pour tea, and make boudoir caps, and be seen sweetly pretty at her prayers on Sunday; for that spells Womanhood to you." Brent shook himself like a Newfoundland coming out of the water. "If Hilary'd get so mixed up

with vulgarity that she could never get separated from it for the rest of her life, it would be the best thing that could happen to her. Vulgarity *is* life."

"We simply don't agree," said Louis with chilling politeness.

"We simply don't! I fail to see"—Brent's eyes retained little of that cool impersonality that had filled them a week ago—"why a woman's progress, freedom if you like to call it, should be forever stopped by refinements and the other anæmia of existence. Good for her if she does get knocked a bit; makes her less of a female, more a creature."

Louis was silent. It was his subtlest method of argument.

"They talk about getting Miss Fayerweather to sing," Brent said, watching him not without a shade of malice, "at the concert, you know."

Louis scowled. Then he said, absently, "Betty has a ripping good voice."

"Yes, I've heard it. Curiously unhappy woman."

"Betty? Why she's the jolliest girl I know. Always laughing, and——"

"And you think because she laughs a great deal, she's happy? It's the one way I've had of telling she isn't. George!—it's ten o'clock. Time for Comer's medicine." Brent hurried away.

Louis gathered up the newspaper, and went into the living-room. Its tan walls and purple hangings were hateful to him; hateful to him its comfortable cushions and good pictures. The bibelots on the table he wanted to dash to pieces in their exquisiteness; the beautiful books to fling into the fire. What difference did it make whether Hilary gave a concert, or didn't give it? For three days—ever since the morning after their attempted flight—she had scarcely spoken to him. When he tried to waylay her, as she went to and from Nash's sick-room, she put him off invariably, saying she was busy—she had no time. *No time!* A week ago she would have had time, Louis knew; yes, if Nash had been dying.

As it was, the man merely had a bad attack of bronchitis; which, to be sure, only Brent's unceasing vigilance had side-tracked from becoming pneumonia. But Hilary spent every minute of the day with her husband; she had given up her room to him and Brent, and taken herself the sleeping-porch. She had done everything, thought of everything, that could minister even trivially to Nash's comfort; but for *him* (Louis) she had not even a "word to throw to a dog." Since that morning of her extraordinary behaviour, out in the kitchen, she had hardly looked at him. And day after to-morrow they were to break quarantine!

Louis threw himself down in a chair by the table, almost upsetting it. His brute strength, his fierce impulse, everything about him seemed unbridled—beyond leash—this morning. Hilary's silence, or worse still, her hurried unnatural responses, were driving him wild with their insinuation. Yet the day that she had promised to flee away with him, she had

been ardent enough; as mad as he. No, he knew: he dated her change from that night—had she not confessed it herself?—and Brent's attack on him. He hated Brent. It was monstrous to him that Hilary did not hate him, too. The man who, when she was free, had not married her—had not even wanted to marry her; who would have taken her (in Louis' opinion) as any man takes any woman, who is light enough—that she should listen to *him!* Accept his opinions, take at its face value his arraignment of her chosen lover! Louis crunched the paper savagely in his hand.

Then drearily he smoothed it out again, and began to read. The column under the headlines Brent had read was devoted entirely to Hilary: her success in London, her student days in Vienna (Louis' face grew black over that part), her beauty, her husband's wealth, and their popularity in Shanghai; ending with an account of the episode of the quarantine at Mr. Pembroke's bungalow, that included not

only the master of the sick servant, but Mr. and Mrs. Comer, and Dr. John Brent, "who were calling."

It was all, to Louis' mind, hopelessly sensational; and in connection with Hilary, impossible. He was about to throw the paper down in disgust, when another item Brent had mentioned caught his eye. "It is hoped" (he read in a supplementary column) "that Miss Bettina Fayerweather, Mrs. Comer's great friend, will add to the success of the proposed concert by lending the charm of her beautiful voice. Miss Fayerweather has a lovely mezzo-soprano of a subtly pathetic timbre that produces a powerful effect on her hearers. Of additional interest is the rumour of the engagement of this very pretty young woman to one of the wealthiest of the young business men at Shanghai. Miss Fayerweather has our sincere best wishes; as for the young man, congratulations would be superfluous. We hear that he is quite sufficiently elated, as it is."

"Well!" Louis muttered. "She certainly hasn't wasted much time about it!" Six months ago, he was engaged to her himself—rather engaged. She couldn't have cared very much, or—dash it, she *was* pretty, you know. Bewitching, really, with her mass of unruly auburn curls, and her big brown dancing eyes, that somehow Louis had not seen dance for a long time. And she had understood a chap, until—there was Harry. When Harry came, he had cared neither for understanding nor for anything. He had rushed headlong into the abyss, and been well shattered for his temerity. God, if only Harry would talk to him!

She talked to Brent fast enough (he dropped Betty, and the paper, to revert to the open sore); though on things quite impersonal, one had to admit. And Brent, when he talked to her: "yes, he is better; no, perhaps not such a good night last night"—Lord! To mouth such dust and bones to a woman like Harry! And always about her husband. Louis watched the two, tense, ever waiting for Brent to

" come to life " ; ready, if he should come to life, to fly at him.

But the days had gone by, and Nash was going to sit up, and still Brent showed Hilary only the courteous unconcern of the professional manner. He seemed even to have gained formality with her, since the night she had " shown him up." Louis told himself that Brent was deep—very deep ; that he was a man to look out for. And proceeded to look out for him, this poor Louis ; till he very nearly went mad with the responsibility.

In Nash's room, Nash and his wife and his doctor were getting rather well acquainted. " I've had a better time since I've been sick," the invalid said that morning, " than in all the rest o' my life put together."

" Well, I haven't," said Brent—so promptly that he at once cast suspicion on himself. He was sitting on the foot of Nash's bed, while Hilary near by, lent her exquisite hands to—darning socks !

" No-o "—Nash looked across at him affec-

tionately—"it's been kind o' tough on you, hasn't it, Doc.? First havin' to persuade yourself and Hal here, that it wasn't cholera —oh, I know" (as the two started guiltily). "I wasn't blind, if I *was* shakin' like the palsy. You thought I was in for it, and all of us. Then when that scare was over, you had a cantankerous sick man to coax away from pneumonia into just a silly case o' bronchitis; to say nothin' of Hal to pacify off the anxious seat, and Louis to jack up into good humour—oh, you've had your job cut out for you, Doc.!"

"Nonsense," said Brent. "Hilary was a Spartan major. And—we've each had our score of the music to face, you know."

"Ye-es; only yours was the drum and the triangle and all the darned gewgaws at once —wasn't it, Hal? Fact is——"

"Have you taken your Bovril?" demanded Brent.

"No, but——"

"Then take it at once. I'll go and heat it

for you. And don't you talk—not another word. I'll be back in five minutes." Brent bolted.

"Say," Nash began, the minute he had left the room, "there's a new kind of man, Hal; one that don't want to hear of his good deeds. Brent's *some* man, ain't he, Hal?"

"Yes," said Hilary, not looking up from the hole she was mending.

"Brought me through this like an army surgeon, ain't he? And cheered you up—kept you regularly beamin', hasn't he?"

"Yes," said Hilary, still over the sock.

"Well, he's a great fellow. Seems to o' got over entirely all that philosophy business" —the shrewd eyes from the invalid's bed watched her searchingly—"don't talk any more about it, does he?"

Hilary's needle snapped. "No," she said. And left the room, obviously to get another.

"Doc.," Nash asked, as Brent appeared with a steaming cup, "is it a good sign when a woman won't talk about a man?"

"Depends," said Brent, tying a napkin under the square chin; "good, or fatal. Search the man."

"I am. That's just exactly what I'm doin'," drawled the other slowly; "and take it from me, he bears searchin'. Did you show Hal the paper?" he asked, making a wry face over the spoonful of beef broth.

"Yes—a moment ago. She says it's ridiculous."

"No such thing. We'll make her do it, eh, Doc.? It'd liven Hal up no end. And I'd be proud as Punch, wouldn't you?"

"Why—of course," said Brent constrainedly.

"Back there in Vienna," Nash went on, between sips, "you must have heard her play a lot."

"Yes, of course," Brent said again. He had taken his former place on the foot of the bed, and was intent on running the fringe of the counterpane through his strong, lean fingers.

"She can play some, can't she?" Nash asked eagerly. "I may not know an octave

from a turnip, but I know that Hal can certainly play some."

"Yes," said Brent briefly, "she can play."

"Humph!" The sick man looked resentfully towards the door, "wonder why she doesn't come back? But seein' that she don't, Doc.," he passed his empty cup with a triumphant wave, to Brent, "there's something I've been wantin' to talk to you about——"

"You ought to go to sleep," Brent put in, setting down the cup. "I've told you a hundred times, you're in as shameless a condition, constitutionally, as a man can get. You want to corral all the rest you can lay hands on; and before we leave here, I'm going to give you a tremendous haul-over——"

"Oh, forget it," begged Nash. "Next time I'm quarantined, I won't spend my time toddlin' to and from the gate in the rain without an overcoat. But now come on and talk to a man—there's a Christian."

"Well"—Brent weakened—"for ten

minutes, then; but *only* ten minutes. What do you want to talk about?"

"You remember the set-to we had—you'n I—the night you and Hal and Louis had your row?" Nash sat alert against his pillows. "About my givin' Hal a divorce?" he added steadily.

"Yes." Brent settled against the footboard. He did not meet the sharp brown eyes bent upon him.

"Well, I put it up to Hal next morning—and half a dozen times since; we've had the chance for some pretty big talks since I've been laid up here. And she won't hear to it—just gets distressed to death the minute I bring up the subject, and says over again that she wants to stay with me."

"Well?" said Brent abruptly, "I should think that's perfectly clear—and understandable."

"Humph!" Nash said to himself, watching him with surreptitious keenness, "and he don't want to talk about it either!"

Aloud, he returned, "That's just what 'tis, Doc.—clearer than she meant it to be. If I thought there was a chance for me—a real chance, y' understand—I'd take it; and let her take a chance, too. Why Hal 'n I, we've only just said how d'ye do these last three days—we never met before."

There was silence in the quiet room for a moment. Then the slow voice went on: "But she's made me see, more by her kindness than by anything else, how hopeless the thing is. She's tryin' to be *fair* to me, and when a woman gets that attitude for you, you might as well pass in your checks—for anything else you'll ever get from her. Damn it," he broke out with sudden violence, "I don't want Hal to district-visit me! Which is what it would amount to—charity, begun at home, and carried on there—*ad lib.* No, sir, I won't have it; and she nor you can't make me have it!"

"I?" echoed Brent.

"Yes—you put her up to it. Louis told me. And what I'm tellin' you this for, is so that

you'll head her off—understand? Make her see that——"

"You seem to have a decidedly important idea of my influence with Hilary," Brent interrupted, with a constrained laugh.

Hilary's husband looked him straight in the eye. "I have," said he; adding, deliberately, "for you're the only man she's ever loved."

Brent turned white as though he had struck him. "Oh, I don't say she loves you now," Nash went on, with his croaky laugh; "don't be passin' yourself that bouquet, Doc. But she did. And you, you thunderin' scientific fool," he added casually, "couldn't hold her."

Brent rose. "Your ten minutes is up," he began, "and——"

"To the devil with you!" cried Nash, "I'll talk for ten hours, if I want to; and you'll listen. Sit down there."

Brent, after a glance at his face, with a shrug of resignation, sat down.

"No reason that I can see, why you should get fidgety over the discussion of a 'situation,'

Nash said mildly; "'tain't as though you hadn't told me from the beginnin' that you aren't in love with Hal now."

Brent smiled stiffly. "Of course I'm not. But——"

"Eh? But——?"

"Well, there *is* a past there, and by George, you turn back the corners with fingers that know how to hurt!"

"Now Confucius be praised!" Nash exclaimed solemnly. "The man can be hurt! And we thought it was a philosopher, with its feelin's hermetically sealed—but thunderation, I'm forgettin'. Even the word's tabooed; phil—say Doc.," he broke off, as the other growled a curse upon his foolishness, "Hal isn't the only one who's changed her mind since this jail o' ours, is she? Why you've had a regular house-cleanin' in yours!

"And I guess," he added slowly, "things tumbled down out o' corners that you hadn't seen for one while—eh, Doc.?"

"Comer, you're drooling." Brent got up.

this time with determination. "No, I won't hear another word. I'll tell Hilary what you say—since you don't seem able to convince her yourself: that you won't have her back on any terms—"

"Oh, look here"—Nash sat up, indignant—"if you go and make it sound like I was a first-class heathen——"

"Well, what else do you think you are? Now you turn over and go to sleep—stop thinking, do you understand? If this infernal rain doesn't let up," added Brent shortly, "we'll all be maniacs by Saturday."

"Humph!" The brown eyes fixed upon him, narrowly. "Seems to me you'd better be lyin' down yourself Doc. You're lookin' awfully ragged; you're worn out with taking care of me. Go and——"

"Stuff!" cried Brent angrily, "I never was better in my life. Go to sleep."

"I won't do it. Not till you confess you ain't as fit as you might be, and promise to take some rest. You look all in."

"You're seeing visions," Brent laughed curtly. "All that's the matter with me is—listen," he said suggestively. There came the drip-drip of the rain on the porch, relentless everlasting; there came the plaintive piping of a rice-bird, the hoarser note of a sleepy owl; and then—the thin monotony of a native chant, borne to them faintly, from the fetid place where Li, faithful and unwearying, wrestled with the gods. "Over a Chinese 'boy'!" Brent laughed again, but differently. "That's what's the matter with me: that eternal, hopeless chant; and the sounds of the country—hopeless too. I never heard them before."

"That so?" said Nash carelessly. "I have. But they aren't hopeless, Doc.—neither's the country. It's *just wakin' up.* Will you give me a drink before you go, there's a good chap?"

When Brent had left the room, "So!" The sick man sank back on his pillows, with a mirthless laugh. "He's hearin' sounds he's

never heard before—hopeless sounds—and he thinks it's the country—the rain, oh Lord! Brent, old boy, your troubles are just beginning; and if that's so," Nash concluded, strangely, "I guess mine are about ended."

He turned his face to the wall; and when Hilary looked in, a few moments later, it seemed as though he slept.

Hilary took her sewing, and went into the living-room—empty for the moment. But once established in the window-seat, with her back to the dreary rain, she did not pick up her needle; but felt in the folds of her frock for a letter—which she almost guiltily extracted. Louis had given it to her, half an hour ago, when he returned from the gate, with the morning post.

"*Mein Liebes Kind* (she read, for the second time), what pleasure I have in knowing you are here in Shanghai, though in what embroglio, poor little one! They tell me you are to be released from your prison on Saturday, and then the old *gross-papa* shall have his

chance, *hein?* I do very much want to see you, not only because it is surely one hundred years since Vienna—so happy, so *gemütlich!*—but because I have one what they say in America, proposition, to lay before you. In three months I am finished with this tour, and then I go back to the concert business—to London. Ah—you guess, *hein?* But do not say no until I have seen you. It is an offer of the extraordinary, I have to make to you—*aber wunderschön!*—you will not refuse. Four years of being married—but in Potsdam (I think it is Potsdam) I have a wife, I know. When you are out of that pest horror, telephone me to the Lyceum Theatre, and tell me where I may see you. I shall come *with contracts.* Till then, I am your most respectful, your most affectionate, Bismarck Maximilian Biehler.

"P.S.—Thy little *camarade*, Lois Howland, played last month before the King of Sweden. She gets one hundred pounds a recital—*I* manage her.—Biehler."

Hilary laid down the letter with a little

laugh—nine parts tenderness. Funny old "Bismarck Max!" But—her face sobered; she knew his obstinacy. At the time of her marriage, they had all but come to blows. And this sly wedge of his through the newspapers, which he had carefully left unmentioned: this idea of a concert in Shanghai, to rouse her enthusiasm, her *égoisme d'artiste* —oh, she knew him. And his naïve scepticism apropos of marriage. She bit her lip for an instant; then her face cleared. Well, they would have a battle royal, but she would win, as she had won before; and Nash should profit.

For Hilary knew now that what she wanted, above all things, was to make reparation to Nash. She took up one of the short brown socks, and smiled: Maternity was in her eyes. And then, her glance fell inadvertently on a closed door far to the other side of the room —a locked door; and suddenly her lip trembled, she dropped the homely brown sock, and hid her face in her hands.

"Hilary"—some one came up to her, a moment later.

"Go away," she said indistinctly, "I'm a baby—you'll have no patience with me."

"Why not?" Brent sat down beside her, a curious fixed expression in his face.

"Because I'm sentimental—simply drowning in it; and you hate sentiment worse than anything in the world." Her words came muffled to him, through the concealing hands.

"No, I don't." Hilary's hands came down, and she stared at him, tears suspended on her wet, astonished lashes. "I mean," said Brent quickly, "I hate insincerity worse. And you've never shown me that."

"No-o," she said uncertainly.

"Then don't begin now. Tell me what's troubling you."

"Nothing"—Hilary wiped her eyes, took up the sock again, and stabbed her needle through it, briskly—"nothing 's troubling me. I had a letter from Mr. Biehler—the old impor-

tunity, you know, to go back to the concert-stage——"

Brent sat suddenly erect. "To—by George," he cried, "why don't you?"

"Because," said Hilary steadily, "I am going to Manila with Nash."

"And that's why you were crying?"

"How absurd! I was crying because—because I was looking round this room, and—and thinking of everything, and"—Hilary was perilously close to crying again.

"You were crying," Brent said curtly, "because you love Pembroke."

Hilary's face, as she looked at him, was old. "I was crying," said she, "because I don't love him. I never have."

XI

THERE was absolute silence for a moment. Hilary's fingers stumbled on at her darning. Then Brent said, jerkily, "Are you sure? How do you know?"

"I know. If I had loved him, could I have doubted him—instantly, on the spur of the moment, without even waiting to hear him—as I did that night? If I had loved him, could I have shown my doubt to you? Questioned you about it, as I did next day? Why I knew then—only I wouldn't admit it—my *love* for Louis"—her voice rang with a fine scorn of self—"amounted to just what he labelled it: an impulse; made up of a lot of sympathies, and—and rather material sympathies, into the idea that I couldn't live without him. I almost wish," she said, with a dry, tight reflection, "that I had never found out

differently. Whatever ignorance may be, there's no bliss in knowledge, John."

Brent looked at the bent profile. "You said something like that to me once before," he remembered, "when——"

"Yes," her eyes met his, without flinching, "when I was leaving you, at Frau Tatler's. But there was not the sting in that knowledge."

"You"—he thrust his hands hard into his pockets—"you don't count the two episodes as altogether parallel, then?"

She drew in her breath; but answered quietly, "Of course I've given you the right to think so. But—there has never been any doubt in my mind as to what I felt for you, John." She had put down her sewing and was looking straight into his face, and talking as she might have talked of her daughter. "My bitterness, at the end of that episode, was not against myself."

He was silent, staring ahead of him.

"I loved you," she said simply. "My worst pain—worse, yes, even than that of having

wronged Nash—is that I have not loved Louis. Yet I was ready to give, I did give him more than ever I would have given you. Unconsciously, I was buying his worship; you had none for sale."

He turned to her then. "Is that all you want—all you've ever wanted?" he demanded almost sternly.

"I want—what every woman wants—tenderness. You had for me reason, and—brute passion. The ground in between, the place of small sympathies and understandings, thoughtfulnesses, pleasures in common—the place where women live, with you was a desert. I fled from it—not from the social stigma."

He gazed at her, in astonishment. Did he know this Hilary?

"And can you wonder"—she was pleading with herself rather than with him—"that when I found that place with Louis, beautiful and full of sweetness, I mistook it for—everything? No, you *can't* wonder," declared

Hilary passionately, "but oh, it's hard now. It's terrible."

Brent looked restively at her. "For heaven's sake, why do you have to pull things to pieces so?" he cried. "It's enough to make any one miserable."

And then he wondered why she laughed—her old gurgling laugh of a child. "Yes, John, isn't it?" she said demurely, "but when did you find it out?"

"I—I——" he stuttered like a school-boy.

"Analysis is the individual's mortal foe," she went on, semi-seriously; "and his most precious friend. Axiom I., by Hilary Comer—but I believe it," she added. "At least, at the end of three days' acquaintance."

"Hilary, I—I suppose I never shall understand you," said the excellent psychologist humbly, "but perhaps if you understand me" —his keen laugh sounded—"that's all that's necessary!"

"I'm sure it is," said Hilary gravely. And took up the brown sock again.

"Have you told all this to er—Pembroke—that you've just told me?"

She crimsoned. "No—I'm a coward."

"But day after to-morrow"—he suggested.

"I know—we break quarantine. Oh, but he knows, Louis knows I'm going with Nash. I told him that three days ago."

Brent moved, uneasily. "He—that is, Comer—seems to think," he began, "that you—that I influenced you unduly, to go with him."

Hilary said quickly, "How absurd! You told me to do what I wanted to do—and I'm doing it; that's all. Oh, I know, Nash has this ridiculous idea of my sacrificing myself—Louis put that into his head," she added, sewing a bit faster. "I've talked and talked, but I can't seem to make him understand."

Brent watched the soft wave of hair above her ear. "I'm beginning to think," he said slowly, "that he understands better than any of us."

She looked up swiftly. "How?"

"He seems to see things from a point of view that is very simple, and—unanswerable. He has no logic, and apparently doesn't wish to have any; but he has an almost eerie shrewdness, and the intuition of a woman."

"Thank you, sir," said she.

"He said yesterday, 'I'm one of the few freaks, I guess, who believe in a woman's right to her own life—*in all directions*—the same as a man's. But when a man marries,' he said, 'he's had a dozen to a hundred chances to perfect his selection of women; whereas a woman, almost invariably in choosing her man, has had none. Yet she's expected to show infallible judgment, and if she slips up in her calculations, to take the consequences.'"

"That's true," said Hilary.

"Of course it's true! But what other man would ever have thought of it—believed it, anyhow? Especially where the woman was his woman. Now Comer sees you not as his woman, but as a person who's made a mistake; a very young person, bound for the

rest of her life to a man she doesn't love. He sees how such a tie could choke your development, and he wants to release you——"

"Wait," she interrupted, suddenly. "This is very fine in Nash; but there's something he—you're both forgetting: I am not that woman who's made a mistake. I didn't slip up in my calculations; I got exactly what I bargained for."

"What?" Brent was distinctly taken aback.

"And I think that's as good a reason as any," she said thoughtfully, "why women shouldn't be given a second chance: they marry, almost all of them, not a man, but a set of circumstances—as pleasant as they can procure. And they're excellently informed on those, you may be sure. The man's incidental, they think very little about him—I know I did. I married for what Nash calls the easy chair: comfort, endless consideration, the fulfilment of every wish almost before it was born: and I got it—a great deal more

than I paid for. I really think," Hilary declared spiritedly, "I might be allowed to balance my accounts!"

He looked at her dazedly. And he had called this woman a sentimentalist! "But don't you see," he began hesitatingly, "that's just what Comer objects to? He doesn't want to be 'paid back'—he can't stand it."

"Oh," she said, "if he insists on taking it as my duty that I'm performing! If he can't see that it's my happiness—which he says he wants above everything——"

"Anyhow," she concluded, wrinkling up her nose in the old perverse fashion, "he can't put me out, unless he gets a divorce. *I'll* never get one."

"You won't?" In his interest Brent leaned forward a little. Neither of them observed a tall figure that had come to stand in the dining-room door, just opposite. "You won't get a divorce, even to please Nash, Hilary?"

"And if I did"—her voice faltered from

its firmness—"what should I do? Where should I go?"

"There's this offer of Biehler's," he suggested quickly, "to go back on the concert-stage. You could go on with your own life, as you'd originally planned it. I think that's really what Nash wants you to do."

"*Do* you—indeed!" Louis sauntered towards them across the living-room, so deliberately that his pale face seemed to grow whiter on the way. "Well, now," he said, towering over the two in the intimacy of their corner, "since you've improved the chance to give her such *disinterested* advice, perhaps you'll generously withdraw, and give me *my* turn!"

"Louis," said Hilary, warningly.

"Oh, of course," said Louis with a discordant laugh, "I understand he's only working to mould a situation, my dear Harry! Don't imagine for a moment, that I thought there was anything personal in his motive. But——"

Brent rose. There was something in his face that Hilary had never seen there before.

It frightened—and thrilled—her. "If you were out of your teens," he said to Louis, "I might answer you. As it is, you're too naïve to be taken other than humorously." And he turned, with unhurried calmness, and left the room.

Louis looked after him for a moment, glowering. "And now"—he flung himself down beside Hilary—"perhaps you'll explain how *he* comes to have the right to constitute himself your mentor, your adviser in chief and in particular. Oh, you've both been very clever about it! You've pulled the wool over my eyes completely, with your distant politeness to each other at meals, and—but you've spoiled all that now. *Now* there's got to be frankness!"

Hilary laid aside her sewing. "Yes, Louis" —she looked long into his eyes—"I think there has."

"Well—well?" he said violently. "What affair is it of Brent's whether you get a divorce or not? Who's he to talk to you——"

Hilary set her lips as though to keep something within. "Nash asked him to talk to me."

"Oh! Brent told you that?" Louis laughed scornfully.

"I didn't think you so ingenuous, Harry. And this Bieman person asked him to talk to you, too, I suppose?"

"Mr. Biehler wrote to me—you brought me the letter this morning."

"Asking you to go back to the concert-stage?" bolted Louis. "The upstart! I'll —but, of course," he laughed again, "it came in very handily for Brent."

"What do you mean?" her very quietness should have warned him; but Louis was beyond reading signs to-day.

"I mean," his voice was low and thick, "that I see through Brent—I've seen through him from the beginning; and it's time you did. First he turns you against me by preaching you a sermon on your duty to Nash; then he stirs up Nash by showing him his

duty to you; so that you'll refuse to come to me, and Nash'll refuse to let you come with him, and you'll be thrown—where? Why, to Brent, of course! And 'your life as you'd originally planned it'—didn't I hear his very words?"

She was staring at him, speechless. But being a woman, she thought first, not of his distorted vision, but of how he must love her to have reached such a vision. A man could not have understood her gentleness as finally she answered him: "All this is quite absurd, Louis; yet I see where your misunderstanding has come in. I must tell you then, that John would not have talked to me at all if I had not approached him first. I was in trouble, and I knew him for an impartial spectator——"

"Spectator!" exploded Louis. "Impartial!"

"Whom I could depend on for an unbiassed point of view," she continued, undisturbed. "I asked him for it, and he gave it to me. This," smiling as at a fretful child, "is the

mole-hill from which you've built your mountain."

But Louis' face only grew darker, more savage. "The mere fact that you could talk to him at all—invite his comment—on *our* private affairs! *I've* tried to get you to talk, a dozen times, but you've had no time for me; you've only had time to discuss me with Brent!"

The colour swept over her cheeks. "That's true," she said constrainedly; "I have avoided you."

"I suppose," he said brutally, "you thought you didn't owe me as much as Brent."

She made no answer. And suddenly he seized her hands, and his voice broke of its harshness, as he cried, "Harry, Harry, you don't know what all this is doing to me! I'm crazy; I'm in hell. Oh,' I know I've never talked to you like this before, but you've made me. You've not come near me for days, and when you have seen me, you've

shrunk from me as though I were a leper. My God, I can't stand it!"

"Dear Louis," she said, gently, though her face had turned entirely white, "I don't think I've treated you that badly. I've been very busy, you must remember, and——"

"And now you're being insincere. Harry, why don't you come out and admit it; you don't feel the same for me that you did—and Brent's harangue against me that night is responsible!"

Hilary's hand went up to her throat; for a moment she fought with her composure. Then—"You're right," she said, "I've been warding this off. I don't feel as I did."

"Ah!" He dropped her hands.

"I know now"—she braced herself—"that I don't love you. I never have."

With one bound he caught her to him. "You don't? Say it again—you don't? And you think I'll believe it, after the things you've said, after your coming out here, after the time you lay in my arms in that chair?"

"Let me go, Louis!"

"Oh, I can talk as well as Brent!" He tightened his hold on her; but his physical magnetism no longer availed. "I've been senselessly restrained all along, but now you'll hear me! Six days ago you loved me enough to leave your husband and the opinion of the rest of the world for what they were worth; and to come to me. I loved you enough to take the responsibility."

"What responsibility?" she asked, standing as far away from him as his arms would let her. "What responsibility does a man take in such cases? It seems to me it's the woman who——"

"Of course! Brent told you that, I suppose. Did he tell you it when he tried to make you keep house with him in Vienna? No, no, Harry—don't look at me like that. I beg your pardon—I had no right to speak that way. Listen——"

"If you'll let me sit down, and sit down yourself, I will listen," she said. "Otherwise

all this is only making matters worse—horrible."

"Oh, very well"—he released her, and they took their former chairs. "When you say 'cases,' Harry," he went on, "you imply that one has gone through this before. I grant you, most men have. But ask any one in Shanghai—any man: they'll tell you I've never looked at a woman. Oh, of course, Betty," he flushed slightly, "but you know all about her—and now she's engaged."

"She denied it to me this morning," Hilary said.

Louis' face cleared a little. "Did she?" he cried. "Oh, but of course she would—girls always deny it. However," he pursued, "the point is that you've been to me literally the one woman. I've never wanted any one else; I've never cared to be with any one else, even for er-larks, and that sort of thing, you know. I—Harry, I can't stay over here! Let me——"

"Wait a moment"—the telephone was

ringing. She took advantage of the interruption gratefully. "I'll answer."

"Hello—hello . . . yes, this is Mr. Pembroke's—do you wish to speak to Mr. Pembroke? . . . Oh!" the corners of Hilary's mouth curled in a peculiar little smile. "Yes, I'll tell him—just a moment."

With her hand over the transmitter, she turned to Louis. "A young person—I judge that she's young—named Miss Evie Tarrara, wants to speak to you. She is here with the Tivoli Opera Company, but she says, 'Mr. Pembroke will know.' I think—our conversation's ended, Louis!"

Louis took the receiver from her hand, and banged it down into the catch. But when he turned round, Hilary had vanished. Nor could he capture her again, to explain. But later in the day he explained a few things to Miss Tarrara, so emphatically that that young lady (a relic of his Oxford days) pouted, "Don't be fusty, Lou-lou; I won't make myself many—not again."

"No, I rather think you won't," muttered Louis, as he left the telephone. "And I'll have her,"—he added tempestuously, of Hilary—"I'll have her if I have to go through hell to get her! Brent shan't——"

"Son," said Nash, entering the room in the dressing-gown and full regalia of convalescence, "a man can't have her if she won't have him. And no man's so big a fool as the one who thinks that because he has her, she'll have him. Remember that," said the older man, "and it'll save you the worst hell you'll ever know—which is after you get her."

Louis came and arranged a chair for him near the fire. "Feeling a bit shaky, aren't you?" he said, with almost his old smile at the weather-beaten face. "There you are! You mustn't mind me," he added, as Nash sank down gratefully into the cushions, "I was blubbering because—well, you said the other day, I've never grown up, didn't you? Perhaps I never will."

Nash looked round at him; Louis had

carefully remained behind the chair, his hands resting on the back. "Somethin' tells me," drawled Nash, "you're beginnin' to grow up right now. What is it, Louis?"

Since the day that they had talked things out a certain understanding had sprung up between the two. "I've made a mess of things with Harry," said Louis slowly; "perhaps you think I jolly well deserved to, but——"

"What was it?" Say, I wish you'd come round where a man can see you, without breakin' his neck!"

Louis reluctantly complied. "It was my beastly jealousy," he said, sitting down; "but who wouldn't be jealous with a fellow like Brent issuing orders, and Harry meekly obeying them! Why, do you know the latest?"

"No—what d'you mean?"

"He's trying to get her to go back on the concert-stage! Told her he thought *you'd* want her to!"

"Humph!" Nash sat bolt upright. "The concert-stage? That's not a bad notion; though I never——"

"You never thought of it?" Louis concluded harshly. "No, of course not. And it's an abominable notion!" he declared.

"Why is it? Since Hal won't marry you" —the sharp brown eyes avoided Louis' face— "and since I won't allow her to make a martyr o' herself with me—seems to me it's the very thing. The life she chose for herself in the first place——"

"And that she couldn't stand even for six months," put in Louis hotly. "Nash, think of the publicity of it, the tawdriness, for a woman like Harry; racketing about the world, stared and gaped at by crowds of wretched people; in constant association with men like this creature Bieman—Biehler what's-his-name. I tell you——"

"Do you know him—Biehler?"

"No, but the mere fact of his managing

this Opera troupe—I do know some one who's in that"—Louis flushed red.

"O-oh!" said Nash.

"Yes, that's the rest of the muddle! A wretched little dancer I used to see at the Halls sometimes is here with this company, and called me up—just when Harry and I were having our talk."

"Oh!" said Nash again.

"You can see the position it put me in! Though the thing was over and done with years ago—Harry wouldn't stop to consider that, of course. She wouldn't even finish the conversation. But she'd said enough before that—she said," Louis' agreeable voice was suddenly hard, "she didn't love me, and that she never had."

Nash cleared his throat. "That—she never had?"

"Yes. That was all; that miserable woman called up, and after that," bitterly, "Harry didn't think it worth while giving reasons, I suppose."

"Women are queer creatures," Nash began, almost apologetically.

But the other man interrupted. "Oh, there's nothing queer to me about this. It's all Brent, pure and simple. He's worked on her from the very first, he's never lost an opportunity to damn me in her eyes. He's dinned and dinned at her until—curse him!" cried Louis, springing up. "But he won't pull off this last trick he's trying, for I heard her tell him that she'd never leave you unless you got the divorce yourself, and turned her out!"

"Hal said that?" Nash's face was grey.

"Yes. Then he began wheedling her with the concert-stage idea—it seems she got a letter from Biehler this morning, with an offer. But there was where I stepped in, and told Brent to clear out. He was all very high and mighty, but he went. Damn him," muttered Louis, pacing the room.

"You think"—Nash's voice was even slower than usual and rather thin—"Doc.'s in love with Hal?"

"Of course he is! I should think a child could see that. The minute he found out she was ready to leave you, he began trying to get her himself. That's why he came out here that day; that's why he's gone through this elaborate affair of appearing to rouse her to her duty to you; that's why——"

"And—Hal? What do you think——"

"The man hypnotises her," said Louis vehemently. "She's putty to him. Can't you see how she must be—how she must have been before, when he got her to promise—my God, I'd like to shoot him down for the dirty fakir he is!"

"Louis," said Nash briefly, "you're dreamin'. All this has preyed on your mind till—come over here and sit down. You make me nervous, prancin' up and down like a caged lion."

Louis flung himself into a chair. "Oh, he's hypnotised you too!" he cried gloomily. "You think he's your friend, but——"

"I guess," said Nash, looking full at him, "I ain't so cock-sure in believin' a man my

friend, as I once was." And Louis had the grace to redden.

"But I am sure o' one thing," the older man went on, "John Brent is no snake in the grass. He's a man. And what's more, he's gettin' to be a bigger man, every day. He may have had some damn fool notions a while back, but he's never been a fakir; and he ain't one now."

"Oh, of course, if——"

"I tell you I've watched him; I know. As for his tryin' to get Hal to go on the concert-stage, that's easy: I asked him to persuade her not to immolate herself on my altar, and she probably put that idea in his head by tellin' him about the letter. He was doing me a service, d'you understand?"

Louis said hopelessly, "I knew you'd take it like that. There's no use——"

"There's no use tryin' to make a man a blackguard, when he isn't one—see? I know you think I'm a booby, and an innocent one at that, but——"

"No, I don't," said Louis impulsively, turning to him; "I told you the other day—I think you're a brick! But it's just for that, that I can't bear to see Brent pulling the wool over your eyes and Harry's. You've been sporting through this, Nash, and I'll never forget it——"

"Stow that," said Nash shortly. "I'm tryin' to make you see you've got the chance o' your life to be a sport, yourself. The woman you thought loved you, says she don't: well, in huntin' the reason, 'stead of suspecting every other man who comes along, why don't you stop and take a look at Louis Pembroke?"

"W-what?" stammered Louis.

"Yes. When I found," said Nash, steadily, "that Hal didn't care for me—even to stay with me as her husband—I turned my specs. inside, and went over what was there. Lord! it didn't take me long to find her *reasons*."

"But," blurted Louis, "she said she *never* had loved me. That was what made it—her coming here, everything—horrible. Oh, I

know you're right—I never thought I deserved her; but I did think—she made me think—she loved me! And"—in spite of his tremendous effort, his voice broke—"I'm a great baby, aren't I? You see," with a ghostly smile, "I can't be a sport. I—she——" he made another valiant attempt to smile; failed; and bolted to the veranda.

Nash looked after him. "No," he said aloud, "you ain't—a baby. You're what I said: just beginnin' to grow up. And this is a facer that'll knock some *man* into you. Lord, I'm tired," he slumped down into his chair with a sigh; "this pesky cold's taken it all out o' me."

He closed his eyes. The fire flickered over the square features, and softened them. "She'll never leave me—unless *I* get a divorce and turn her out! *I*—turn her out!" He laughed unsteadily, as he caught the sound of her step coming towards him through the hall.

XII

HAVING played hide-and-seek with himself for several days, Brent at last halted; face to face with a bad quarter of an hour.

He came from hearing Li's latest report of Ping; all was going satisfactorily, the nurse said, the real crisis had certainly been passed; and when the others broke quarantine on Saturday, the sick boy would be on the road to recovery. Of course he was still very ill, but all signs were favourable. Brent nodded, and started instantly into the house to tell Hilary. It was then that he met Louis, and the latter stopped him, awkwardly.

"I want to apologise to you," he said, "for speaking to you as I did this morning. I—you've quite as much right to love her as I have, and—and if you do, I—it's all right."

"What?" Brent exclaimed, accepting the offered hand much as though it were Pandora's box—and he knew not what might explode from it the next minute.

"Of course," Louis said, with an attempt at a smile, "nobody could help seeing that you care for Harry, as—as we all do. But I behaved like a stupid ass this morning, in showing resentment. I'm sorry."

Brent mumbled something adequate, though incoherent; and instead of going on into the house, cut off down the drive at a furious pace. The rain had dwindled to a foolish drizzle; he walked up and down, not heeding it.

So no one could help seeing! And the thing he himself had refused to see, that he had eluded in a panic of denial each time it peeped shily at him round a corner, was perfectly plain to everybody else; more than plain, no doubt, to Hilary. Brent dug his heels into the gravel, wrathfully. He cared for her "as they all did." And they all knew it. Of

course, that explained Comer's rallying talk of this morning; and the increased bitterness of Pembroke's hostility. They had "seen through" him, where he was too much of a coward even to look into himself; Pembroke now openly admitted his right to be one of the insane fraternity. "Oh Lord, oh Lord," groaned Brent, "spare me this blithering idiocy! Anyhow, now that I recognise it, help me to tie its feet—clip its wings—handcuff it, gag it. George!" he wiped the perspiration from his forehead, "was I ever in such a wax!"

To be in love, at forty, and with Hilary Comer! "I tell you"—shaking his fist at the bungalow in the distance—"it's a microbe! It never would have got me if I hadn't been penned up with those other two, wallowing in the thing. And now what's to be done? Talk about cholera—one can die of that. All this does to you, is to turn your brain into a scrambled egg, that lies on top your heart which is mush. A pretty fighting diet!

'But, of course, you aren't in love with Hilary now!'"

He leaned his arms moodily on the gate, and stared down the murky road. Day after to-morrow he would be taking it, to go back to his patients, to his work; for three days and more, he hadn't given it a thought—nor Shanghai. He caught sight of one of the familiar paradoxes of the place: an old Chinaman coming down the road, his ragged waddings bellying out with the wind, his sparse pigtail flying, as he rode round delivering the Europeans' evening paper—on a bicycle. Ordinarily, Brent would have had things to say about dignity risking its neck and making a fright of itself on the modern whirligig, for the sake of a few cash; to-night, the old man merely recalled him from his isolation, to the fact of the town—and activity—lying yonder.

He heard the quick splash of a 'ricksha down the road; and then—it was nearing the dinner-hour—the heavier sound of carriages. But even with these noises of the humming

thoroughfare came another that Brent was not to forget to the end of his life: the noise of sly creeping through the leaves. He started violently; then muttered, in exasperation, "Yes, that's just the sort of thing you'll be doing, from now on—remembering things, dwelling on 'em, seeing spooks in every corner, exactly like the next old woman. And for all the good you'll be at psycho-neurosis—*yours 'll* be the only case you can so much as analyse."

He strode up and down till the dark fell, and gradually he grew less agitated. Going back over incidents, bit by bit, he became convinced that Hilary did not know of what he called his idiocy. That if Louis had suggested it to her, she did not believe it. If she had, she could not have talked so naturally with him over the past—bringing it in herself, going over it with the frank, uncynical touch that marks the remote. "I loved you," she even said. Brent, the rebellious, suddenly gave way to another creature. Something

stuck in his throat. "There never has been any doubt in my mind as to what I felt for you, John."

He stopped stock still, in the middle of the drive: he could almost hear her voice. Then there came another, drier voice: "And you, you thunderin' scientific fool, couldn't hold her!" Because, he answered it and himself, sharply, he hadn't wanted to hold her. He had wanted her, as Nash said, for a stimulus to the machine (as he wanted everything), and when he couldn't get her on his terms, he ignored that she might exist for him on any other. She was taking toll from him now, with the relentlessness of soft things; for now, during the past days, he had watched her come forth from her chrysalis of the merely feminine and stand before him a woman, strong and sweet, and whom he wanted—why not make a clean breast of it?—as he had never known he could want anything.

And she was Nash Comer's wife, and just escaping from a stormy love affair over which

she was still asking his (Brent's) advice! The subtle irony of her revenge brought a grim smile to his lips: what would she say of the "emotional complex" now, if she knew? Well, she must not know. Only himself could let her see, and he was sure of his inveterate control. But there came to him, as he walked back to the house, that picture of her in the door: the blue-green, shimmering robe, and the softer veils of her hair, and her eyes and the luring mystery of her mouth. A new and volcanic impulse surged up in him: to lay hands on that hair, to gaze into the eyes so near that there should be no secrets from her or from him; to throw control to the four winds, and make that mouth yield its mystery until——

"I'm so glad you're here," said Hilary; "I thought you were never coming back." She had opened the door, as he came on to the porch, and stood there within it: in the blue-green haze of the "old tea-gown."

"You thought—you——" Brent's voice was

husky, his hands were clenched behind his back.

"Why, what's the matter?" she laughed. "Come in—it's so cold and nasty out there."

"Yes," his laugh echoed hers strangely, "it is." Coming into the light, he gazed at her; and gazed.

"You're looking at my hair," Hilary smiled, running her hands through it; "I know, it's all but down. I've been asleep on the couch." At that moment, the last big pin that held the dark waves in place fell to the floor. Brent stooped to get it. But she was too quick for him; and with the motion, the whole rippling, fragrant mass was round her shoulders, and tumbling to her knees. "Now I *shall* have to go and fix it," she said, laughing elfishly at him out of the mists.

He took a step towards her. "You said," he began unevenly, "you were glad I'd come back. That you——"

"Oh—yes," said Hilary, "I wanted to ask you what to give Nash for dinner."

"What to give"—Brent's own laugh rang out now; dry and abrupt—"oh yes, of course—what to give Nash for dinner. My dear Hilary, I should say chicken broth and milk toast." He turned from her, and strode off down the hall.

"Dolt!" he was muttering, "will a few lessons like that teach you?"

Hilary looked after him, mystified. What had come over him? He'd been so good these last days—more than good, she decided, thinking over the long, frank talks that had served her as compass and chart combined. There had never been any one to whom she could talk as to John; his very presence dispelled self-consciousness. Yet just now he seemed overwhelmed by self-consciousness, himself. What could be the matter? She went on back to her room, a little pucker between her eyes. He was so much gentler, so much more—sympathetic than he had been those years ago; it would be a shame for anything to upset their comradeship now.

But, Hilary answered confidently, nothing could.

When he came into Nash's room, a few moments later, to tell them about Ping, she was reassured. He seemed thoroughly himself again: the positive, cool-voiced physician. "But, by George, that boy had a close shave," he said. "Li told me he gave him up, that morning after the relapse—you remember?" to Hilary.

She shivered. "Do I remember!"

"Well, now he's turned the corner," said Nash, from his arm-chair piled with pillows, "Li can sort o' catch his own wind, can't he? He must be about played out."

"Yes. Sanders told him to get out and walk round a bit, morning and evening—he'll stay on that side of the Line, though, of course, there'll be possibility of contagion for some days yet. And they have a whistle over there, like a screech-devil, for Ping to call him if he needs him."

Hilary, at the window, said, "And it's

stopped raining. Oh, I do believe the worst of everything is over!"

"Sure," said Nash. "Look at me—I feel like a fightin' cock. After to-morrow you won't be makin' any broths and Bovrils for *me*. And Doc. here," he said innocently, "can be gettin' back to his German magazines—eh, Doc.?"

Brent laughed. "I suppose so," he said, with no great enthusiasm.

"Humph! Seems kind o' funny to think we've only one more day here, don't it?"

"Yes," said Brent.

"Yes," said Hilary. "I must get your dinner now, Nash," she added, hurrying from the room.

Nash gazed after her. Then he turned to Brent—to find Brent gazing after her too. "Well, what kind o' luck 'd you have?" he asked tersely. "Puttin' it up to Hal, I mean."

"About your not wanting her?" Brent said levelly. "I'm afraid I'm a poor emissary—you'll have to talk to her for yourself."

"Ho-ho," Nash croaked, regarding him rather fixedly, "so you ain't keen any longer to regulate this situation? Now I thought, Doc., I was givin' you a job just to your taste."

"Did you?"

"Sure. I thought you'd have it all fixed up by now. A master o' strategy, like you——"

"I'm afraid I'm distinctly a failure at strategy—of any kind. I offer my resignation."

"Accepted," Nash said promptly; "it's a bum job anyway. What's yours for the next?"

"Minding my own business," said Brent, curtly. "By a miracle, I may be better at it than I've been at other people's." He turned on his heel, and went out.

"Search the man," murmured Nash, under his breath—"unless I'm pretty much mistaken, he's been searchin' himself, and found out something!"

XIII

"NASH," Hilary came up to him next morning, where he was sitting on the veranda wrapped in rugs, "do you know that your—our ship, the *Monitor*, is being held in quarantine in Manila, for cholera? Betty just told me. It's rather uncanny."

Nash looked up into her serious face. "Pooh," he scoffed, "that's nothin'. Of course there were other cases in Shanghai besides Ping—all that clean bill-of-health talk was a joy-dream; and some of 'em escaped out of town, that's all."

"Yes"—into Hilary's grey eyes came an odd expression—"some of them escaped—out of town."

"Why, honey," he said, "what's the matter? All this has got on your nerves; but shucks! Ping's comin' along fine, and none of us could get it now. Why even Sanders

believes in us now—I should hope he did, our seventh day in this lock-up!"

"No," said she, "of course none of us would get it now. I—I wasn't thinking of that." She sat down on the steps near him, leaning her dark head against one of the tall porch pillars. She wore a rough red coat—for in spite of the fitful sun, it was inclined to be raw outside, and damp—and Nash thought her, with the hair curling in soft little rings round the pensive face, the loveliest thing he had ever seen.

"And to-morrow we'll be free," she was saying.

"Ye-es," Nash looked down the drive at the letter-box—"we'll leave the yellow flag and the Line and—we'll start fresh."

"Oh, will you, Nash?" she begged in a low voice. "I've been hoping you'd promise that, but——"

"Look here," he broke in, "I wasn't meanin' you and me when I said that; I was meanin' all of us."

"But I do mean you and me," she insisted. "I hoped at last you meant it too. Do you want me"—she watched him acutely—"to stay with Louis? To—marry Louis?"

The ragged moustache hid Nash's mouth until he spoke. When he did, it was to say, "I've told you over and over: I want you just to be happy. Not to keep on puttin' up with me because you—damn it, Hal," he burst forth vehemently, "no man with a man's heart in his body wants a woman to make a sacrifice of herself for him!"

"Oh, I know (as she shook her head impatiently) you've persuaded yourself since that first talk o' ours, that livin' with me is the one thing in this world you're crazy about doing. That—why, Hal, I know you. But you can't fool me like you fool yourself. Y'see——"

"I'm not fooling you—nor myself," she broke in, almost despairingly—they had gone over all this so many times. "You say you want me to be happy, and I tell you that to be with you will make me happy. You say I'm

the one who's to decide things, and the first plan I make you refuse to listen to. You even send John to talk to me——"

"Humph, he did talk to you then?"

"He talked to me half of yesterday morning. He—you—both of you ought to have convinced me before this, I suppose, that you don't want me; but——"

"*Want* you?" Nash cried out, the rugs threatening to fall away from him at one sweep. Then he gathered them round him again. "No, my dear," he said, in his usual tones, "it won't do. You might be happy with me for six months—a year; I believe you would; but then——"

"You think I'd repeat this experience again?" she finished, her voice very low. "You naturally would think that. But, Nash——"

"I think," said he doggedly, "that you're twenty-six, and I'm forty-three, and—well, answer me just one question: do you love me, Hal? As—as you thought you loved

Louis? As," he added, distinctly, "you did love Brent? Do you, Hal?"

She met his eyes bravely. "No, I don't —now. But——"

"Would you ever?" he pursued inexorably. "It's the truth between you'n me now, Hal—would you?"

"I"—the colour poured over her cheeks, and to the bare throat—"why not?" she returned defiantly. "I love you now in every other way, and——"

"And you'll never love me *that* way if you live to be a hundred. You know it, and I know it."

"Well, and what if we do?" she cried, lips trembling as she vainly tried to conquer her emotion; "didn't we know it when we were married? And didn't we marry, just the same?"

"We did," he said grimly, "and this last six months we've begun to pay for it. I guess we know a little more, Hal, than when we were married—both of us. Think of what this

week here has stood for, and don't let's sow the seed for another as bad."

"Then you do think it would happen again! You think I've learned nothing——"

"No, I'm only tryin' to make you see *I've* learned something myself. I don't think much o' divorce—I guess you know that—but I think still less of—murder. And that's what it would be, tyin' a woman your age to a man she'll never love—why you're only a girl, Hal—twenty-six."

"I tied myself," she reminded, sitting very straight.

"Yes, and how much did you know of what you were doing? Nothin'. You couldn't know. You didn't know until a man o' your own age and your own kind came along—and opened your eyes. Wait a minute"—as she started to interrupt. "No matter whether you love him or don't love him, there's that fact: he opened your eyes to what you'd done; and I'll bet," said Nash, earnestly, "it was a bitter wakin' up."

"Yes," she said faintly, "then, it was."

"Then! Well, Lord above us, Hal—don't you see you're just beggin' me to let you make the same mistake right over again? You and I are, to all intents and purposes, on the verge o' remarrying: that's what it amounts to. Well, we aren't goin' to do it."

"I think," she spoke with an effort, "there's one thing you forget, through all this: I do know more than when I first married you. I know your goodness and tenderness—I know you this week as I've never known you before; and being your wife now would mean a very different thing to me from what it used to—oh, you must see that!"

"Honey"—his hand went out to her, then slowly he drew it back. "Don't make it too hard for me," he begged hoarsely, all at once; "I've gone through the fire, but I'm not a saint, and I'm tryin' my best to be square with you, Hal. Listen: goodness and tenderness—even if I'd got 'em—don't fill a woman's life. There are things that cry out, and

that're goin' to cry out, and that *ought* to cry out, till she's satisfied. And," his voice dragged, like the voice of an old man, "if she's never satisfied, she'd better not have lived. That's my philosophy," said Nash.

Hilary was sitting quite still. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she did not know it. "That's what I'm fightin' for, for you," he concluded, looking away from her. "You understand, now."

She tried to speak—failed; and put her hand up, desperately, seeking his among the heavy wraps. When she found it she held it tight; and they sat like that for some moments silently.

Then she said, looking up at him like a little girl, "What shall I do? What do you want me to do?"

"We-ell"—all the resolution in the world could not make Nash's voice casual—"there's this offer o' Biehler's——"

She started. "How did you know?"

"Louis told me. Now don't you go and get mad with him for it, Hal—Louis was pretty well down and out yesterday, and he just had to shoot things off his chest. He's a darn sight better for it to-day, haven't you noticed?"

"I—I only saw him at breakfast," said Hilary.

"Well, then," said Nash boldly, "you'll be wantin' to see him again. You'll be wantin' to have another talk with Louis, my dear—won't you?"

Her face hardened—a new look for Hilary. "Probably he told you also why our other talk was broken off."

"Yes. But because Louis made a fool o' himself when he was eighteen, or some such puppy age, you ain't goin' to make one o' yourself now?" Nash returned bluntly. "'Course you'll want another talk with Louis! But that's neither here or there—we were talkin' about Biehler."

"I told Mr. Biehler this morning, over the

'phone, that I couldn't consider his proposal. I made it final."

"Well, but you will consider it," said Nash persuasively; "now, won't you, Hal?"

She drew her hand away. "That is what you want me to do?" she said slowly.

The square features of the man above her set like flint. "Yes," said Nash steadily; adding, "don't you see, it'll be just what we said: you'll start fresh. These four years will be wiped off the slate——".

"But I don't want them wiped off!"

"All but what you've learned from 'em," he continued, moistening his lips which were dry like those of a man at the end of a race. "You'll begin again with twenty times as much sense as you had before; and you'll succeed—*every way*—this time. Will you, Hal?"

Her face worked convulsively for an instant. Then—"Yes, I will," she cried, springing up; "but oh, I never, never thought that you would push me out!" And she rushed from

him into the house; almost colliding with Brent, who was just coming out.

"Hilary"—he caught sight of her face—"what's the matter?"

"The matter? The matter—why, nothing at all. I've just been talking to Nash. He—I—I'm going back on the concert-stage," she finished all in one breath.

"It's a very good idea," said Brent spiritlessly.

"Yes, isn't it? That's what Nash thinks—you think so too, you told me yesterday morning. Well, since both you and he——"

"Oh, but I don't want—I mean to say," Brent stammered, "don't let me influence you. Perhaps——"

"I'll telephone Mr. Biehler now," she was moving swiftly towards the desk, "and make an appointment for to-morrow afternoon. I don't care to discuss it with him over the 'phone, or I'd——"

"But is there any great hurry?" Brent put

in feebly. Really, when Hilary once took hold of a thing!

"Certainly—they're leaving town on Sunday. Besides," she was fumbling at the directory, with fingers that shook, "it's all decided, and the sooner the arrangements are made—but if you think I *want* to go back to being a public person," she broke out tremulously, "if you think I want to be battered round the earth alone again——"

"By the Lord, yes!" Brent almost shouted. "Why didn't Comer think of that?" He forgot—they both forgot, that Comer was sitting just outside the open window.

"Why didn't you think of it?" she demanded, turning round. "You know what it means better than he; and it was your idea—you suggested it"—two tears fell over the dark lashes and into Hilary's lap—"you want me to do it too!"

"Oh, Lord!" At sight of her tears, at sound of the quivering, hurt voice, Brent had walked as far to the other end of the room

as he could go. "Hilary," he said in a tight, unnatural tone, "if you'll only do exactly what you want, I'll be the happiest man on earth!"

She looked over at him, caught his expression; something almost like terror dawned in her face. "That's what Nash said," she remembered, half under her breath, "the very words. John, you can't mean——"

He was back with her in half a dozen swift steps. "Yes, I do mean it—it's true. Think what you like of me," he said harshly, "you can't think worse than I do of myself."

"I"—she gasped, staring at him—"I never dreamed of such a thing!"

"Nor did I," he retorted grimly, "till it exploded over my wooden head last night. But it's true: I love you. I always shall love you; and I think—if you looked into that in-between place now, you'd find it not such a desert, Hilary."

She was white, then red. "Louis told me this, but I thought he was mad," she said.

"Yes—Louis told me, too! I've been well punished for meddling in your affairs, though, haven't I?" he gave a short laugh. "Well, now I'll clear out."

"But," she cried impetuously, "I don't want you to clear out."

"Hilary!"

"I mean," she laughed nervously, "you're so much better at my affairs than I am. You've shown me—John, where should I be now, at the end of this week, if it hadn't been for you? It—it frightens me to think." For a moment she covered her eyes.

"And I was boasting to myself only last night," she went on, "that nothing could break our friendship now."

"You wanted it to go on?" He stood looking down at her, hands deep plunged into his pockets.

"It *will* go on," said Hilary clearly. "Please"—she held out her hand to him, with a luminous smile—"meddle a little more, won't you, John?"

He gripped her hand. Then dropped it, as though it burnt. "For God's sake, telephone," he muttered, "this isn't—four years ago."

"No"—she looked up at him, realisation crowding in on her—"if it were——"

"If it were—we'd be married to-night! *Would we*, Hilary?"

Hilary closed her eyes. "Yes," she said.

"Hey, Doc.," called a croaky voice, "am I goin' to have an egg-nog?"

The two within, started, shocked. Brent, who had stooped towards her blindly, straightened with a jerk. "Of course—I'll bring it to you," he said, trying to speak naturally.

"And I," said Hilary, swaying to the desk, "will telephone Mr. Biehler."

But when Brent was gone, she leaned her arms on the desk and hid her face in them. "A bundle of impulses!" she accused herself hotly. "First it's Louis, then John—whoever's the last comer! You even thought it might be Nash—no," her inherent honesty

asserted itself then; it never could be Nash, and Nash knew it. She knew it too, now. And it always had been John: she knew that, also. He had had the girl's first love, and the woman's undying remembrance. Louis had been a madness, short-lived, seized upon in her restless search for satisfaction—of she knew not what. And John loved her. *Now* John loved her; and in the desert she had fled from, flowers were growing: she would never see them.

She raised her head, and caught sight of Nash—his brown profile against the window-pane, looking somehow pinched, numb. And suddenly she flew out to him, stood beside his chair. "I'm doing what you told me," she said chokingly, "I'm telephoning Mr. Biehler I'll go back. But Nash, no matter what I do, you're my husband; and as long as you live I'll never belong to any one else. I couldn't now—I won't."

"Here's your drink, old man," said Brent steadily, behind her.

Hilary, without looking at him, went into the house. With the calmness of extreme tension she telephoned Biehler, and made the appointment; returned adequate answers to the manager's joyous protestations; and was finally free to sink into a chair—limp, almost lifeless, of emotion.

As she lay there, huddled up, with her eyes shut, a voice asked hesitatingly, "Can I do anything, Harry?"

She opened her eyes. "Oh, Louis," she begged, "not now——"

"I'm not going to bother you. I only thought—you looked so awfully tired—I thought if I could get you anything——"

"You're very good"—even in her utter weariness, his humility struck strangely on her—"I only want to be alone. Perhaps I'd better go to my room." She half rose, then sank down again. "I *am* tired."

"Just let me make you some tea," he pleaded, "see—all the things are here, I can do it in five minutes."

She started to say no, but found herself saying yes instead. "I believe it will do me good," she murmured, "thank you, Louis."

Louis filled the kettle, lit the little lamp, and measured out the tea; all with the deft quiet of a woman. Then, before the water boiled, he vanished into the dining-room, and came back with two thin slices of bread and butter on an exquisite old plate. "Tiffin is served," he laughed gently, "will the fairy princess wake up and eat?"

Hilary sat up with a start. "Oh! how nice," she took the fragrant cup from him, gratefully; "but you're spoiling me, Louis!"

Louis' eyes lighted dangerously. "I wish you'd let me! It's all I——"

"*Please*"—all the weariness came back into her face.

"I'm sorry. No, do go on—I won't talk. I—I forgot, for a moment; I'll really not talk, Harry."

She sipped her tea for a moment in silence.

Then she said, "I want to talk—another time. I wasn't altogether fair to you yesterday."

"And I," he returned in a low voice, "was abominable to you. I don't know what got into me—I was crazy. Will you try to forgive me, Harry?"

"If you hadn't a good deal to forgive me," she said, "there wouldn't have been any yesterday. I was going to tell you—to ask *your* forgiveness, when——"

"I know—when that awful woman called up. Harry, she's nothing to me; only a stupid little dancer I knew when I was a youngster at Oxford. You—you knew she was nothing to me now, didn't you?"

"I should have known," said Hilary frankly, adding, "how could she be, when she's only come here this week?"

"Yes, but I mean—anyhow. You—even if you've never loved me—you trusted me, you knew I'd not lie to you?" A tremendous earnestness was in Louis' voice.

Hilary was silent. "You didn't know?" he cried out.

"Louis"—she set down her cup, and the fragile plate—"I knew you'd mean to tell me the truth, but—I've been through such changes and confusion, myself, this week; what was truth one minute was all fancy the next. And—I thought it might have been the same for you. I almost hoped it was."

"You hoped that *you* had been only fancy with me?"

"Forgive me Louis—I did."

He got up, and walked over to the window—not the one now closed at Nash's back; but the one through which he had seen her coming up the drive, a week ago to-day. "I think," he said, "if that was fancy, I don't want any reality in my life."

"Oh forgive me, forgive me"—Hilary forgot herself and her possessing fatigue, and went over to him—"it's my fault, and I can't undo it. I told you before—I've been worse than wicked: shallow; and you've had to

suffer. But, oh, do believe me, I've suffered too!"

He laughed unsteadily. "Do you suppose I don't know that? Don't think I'm blaming you—no, for Heaven's sake don't think that. I've been coward enough, without"—he turned and faced her. "When I was cursing Brent and everything else, yesterday, after you said you didn't love me, Nash said to me all of a sudden: 'Why don't you take a look at Louis Pembroke?' And Harry, I did—I think it must have been the first look I'd ever had at the miserable cad; and I understood.'

"Louis, Louis——"

"Blame you?" His laugh sounded again, contemptuously. "Why, I only wonder that you ever *thought* you loved me. And—and that was all I wanted to say to you, dear."

"Oh, Louis"—she laid her hand on his arm, for an instant—"you aren't a cad—you aren't! You're fine, and strong, really; but like me, you've been following your impulse, and that leads to misery. Perhaps—perhaps

it isn't so stupid as we thought, to look at things under the microscope."

Louis' hand closed over hers. "Perhaps it isn't," he said.

"I want to tell you"—she looked up at him, with a brave show of courage—"what I'm going to do, after to-morrow. I've arranged to accept Mr. Biehler's offer—to take up my work again. Nash wishes it, and —I've agreed."

"You—you're going back on the concert-stage? You *are*?"

"Yes. Won't you wish me luck, Louis?"

He looked down at her; the quick anger that had swept his face vanished then. For above her determined smile, he saw her eyes which were brimming; he saw the significance of the drooping figure, its hint of the desolate. And reverently he raised her hands, and kissed them. "I wish you," said he, "all the luck there is, Harry!"

With that he turned and almost ran from her, out of the house. Past Nash, who,

catching a glimpse of his face, sighed, comprehendingly. "But he'll get over it, the youngster," pondered Nash, watching him rush off down the drive. "Brent won't. And Hal—Hal's got to be battered round the earth, alone; but if 'twas four years ago—they'd have been married—Hal and Doc. And now—Hal 'll never belong to another man, as long as I live. Damn it, why couldn't I have got the bloomin' cholera anyhow?"

Suddenly a change came over the brown features. He wrenched the wraps from round his throat. And, after an interminable minute, "Why not?" he asked hoarsely, aloud. "*Why not?*"

XIV

He sat there, head between his stocky bent shoulders, for a long time, thinking. What came to him most distinct, was the coincidence he had laughed at: that the *Monitor*, his ship, was being held in quarantine, for cholera.

"Humph!" he muttered through stiff lips, "well, there are ways I'd sooner choose for—freein' Hal, but when a thing pops out at you by every route, and at the same time looks like an accident——"

He sat up slowly, almost painfully. "What was that Doc. said—'you're in about as rotten condition, constitutionally'—he said, too, last night: 'there'll be the possibility of contagion for several days yet.' Oh, yes," to that Someone he had challenged before, "You fixed it up: You laid the cards out,

thinkin' I'd see the trick. Well, I've seen it, all right. And—*I'm goin' to take You up!*"

When Hilary came to call him to lunch, he was going over a sheaf of papers he had pulled from his pocket. "Oh—Hal," he said casually, "this afternoon, I'll want to be lookin' over these with you. There'll be some business matters, you know, you'll have to take in hand, when—when we aren't together."

"Why?" she asked, head averted from him. "Can't you manage for me—where will you be?"

"Oh," with an extravagant wave of the hand, "you can't tell where I'll be. Cattle-farmin', horse-racin', tea growin'—I'll be all over the place! No, you can't depend on me," Nash said, rising to follow her inside, "you'll have to take things over, yourself."

"Very well," she said lifelessly.

That luncheon was to Hilary the most terrible meal of her life. She tried to eat, and to talk; but food stuck in her throat, and

speech with it. Brent's presence next her was like volt upon volt of electricity, concentrated to the point of the unbearable. It was all she could do to keep from crying out; to sit there quiet beside him.

Nash talked incessantly, and told stories and made jokes—at which Louis' high laugh rang out, continuous and shrill. The sun, finally asserting itself in the noonday, glared through the long windows like a jealous host, turning gaudy the delicate flowers, garish the blue and pale grey of the walls. It was as though a master scene-painter had prepared the stage for a fairy-tale play, and at the last moment some philistine ordered the spotlight of melodrama. As though scene had succeeded scene, in the picture-show, until now the rotation was complete: they were back at the starting-point: the monotonous shifted to the initial grotesque. But all this chatter and strained laughter was a thousand times more awful to Hilary than the silence and awkwardness of a week ago. She had to struggle not

to clap her hands over her ears and scream, to shut it out.

And when they left the table, and she found herself reseated opposite Nash in the brilliant living-room, it seemed still worse. Nash was talking about stocks and bonds; but it was not real talk. It came in the fast, run-together elocution of lines that he had learned—of a "speech." They would leave it all presently, and go home.

But then Nash asked her a question. "What did you say?" she returned confusedly.

"I want to know if you understand—if there's anything I've left kind o' hazy to you."

Hilary put her hand up to her head. "It's all hazy to me—impossible. I haven't heard. Will you say it over again?"

This time she listened, with painful application. Nash talked slower; it *was* real, it must be; since she was answering, agreeing, questioning—herself, not a creature out of a book. She kept repeating to herself that

really there was nothing strange about it: for the future she was to live alone; she was receiving instruction in the management of what would be hers. It seemed a great deal.

"Aren't you giving me everything?" she asked once, appalled by the figures he was quoting. "You know I shall be earning all I really need, and——"

"You're my wife." An obstinate look she knew well came to the homely mouth. "You say as long as I live, you will be. Well, then" —his inflection grated on her, somehow— "as long as I live, I can give you what I choose. It ain't so thunderin' much."

"Very well," she said meekly. But, as he handed her two bulky envelopes, "Oh, I can't think all this is right!" she cried again, in spite of herself. "Something—it seems to be so final, so—so horrible."

Nash was folding papers, with his back to her. "Now don't you fret, Hal," he said; "everything's coming out all right, and the best way for—everybody." He turned then,

and smiled at her; but his smile seemed to her the most terrible of all.

"Listen," she said quickly, "it isn't too late to stop this yet. Why, nothing's really been done. I can make an excuse to Mr. Biehler, and——"

Nash broke out violently, "No! Please Hal," he added, more quietly, "won't you do this for me? Carry things out as we've planned—even though maybe you don't see the sense of it. Won't you?"

She met his eyes. Something in them that she did not understand made her say, "Of course I will, Nash—if you wish it."

He drew a great breath. "That's right. Now you'd better put those deeds in some safe place, and I," he said carelessly, "think I'll toddle over and ask how Ping's gettin' on. I'm feelin' so frisky m'self, to-day——"

"Oh, but do you think you'd better go out?" she looked up anxiously.

"Wasn't I out all morning? Sure I can go out."

"Well, put on an overcoat—wait, I'll get it for you." She ran to the closet and dragged out a heavy raglan of Louis'. "There—and here's your cap. But don't stay long, will you, Nash? You know it's really your first day out of bed, and——"

"I'll be careful. Promise you not to come down with a relapse, anyhow. Oh—I wonder if Li 'll be over there now? Maybe he'll be out strollin' round the place."

"No, he takes his walks morning and evening—before breakfast and after dinner."

"I see," said Nash. He slipped his short arms into the coat she held, and took up his cap. Then laid it down again, taking a sudden swift step towards her. "Good-bye, my dear," he said, looking down at the papers she now held in her hand, "I mean,"—backing away with an awkward laugh—"so long for a while, of course."

"Good-bye," said Hilary, looking back at him steadily.

All at once he put his hands up and framed

her face with them, and kissed her—for the first time since they had met at Louis'. "I" —he began to say something more, stopped, and pushed her gently from him. When the door closed behind him, she heard a curtain drop. The next to last scene was played and ended.

The very last was a strange one. The afternoon wore away its glittering film, and collapsed; to show night, inky, absolute. Dinner was a mere farce; the telephone slurred its rough edges by ringing continuously. Then, all arrangements for the morrow were complete; the grateful tinkle-tinkle ceased, and quiet—leaden, suffocating—descended upon the four.

They rose from the table, stolidly, and went into the big room beyond, for the last time. Its soft lamps and purring fire were aglow, but its hangings at the windows were black; and beyond the windows was black: black and more black. Louis strode over and jerked down the shades with a rattle. "I hate a

night like this," he explained half shamefacedly.

"It's stifling," said Brent, and threw open the door.

The pitchy dark seemed to rush in, and take possession.

"A thickish evening," said Nash, settling in his favourite chair.

It was then that Hilary, who had been standing irresolute, flew to the piano; as though her life depended on it. Tore into a Liszt mazurka, and—the final curtain went up.

Chopin, Tschaikovsky, wild marches and wilder dances she played; and then Strauss, crashing from discord into discord, as though the Furies had got into her fingers, and bestowed them with mad strength. *Feursnot*, *Salome*, *Elektra*, *Don Juan*—surely and terribly she played, her face lost in her hair, that fell about it like some Melpomene's: brooding, relentless. Louis, watching her as long as he could, leapt to his feet, and went out. She played on; the tragic chords of the *Pathétique*, the wailing

minor of the *Unfinished Symphony*, the dreadful sweetness of parts of the *Moonlight;* and, at last, the *Appassionata.* Brent, who had been stalking the room, turned and fled through the door into the black. Hilary never ceased playing. Now it was the death-song of *Marguerite:* the beautiful melody-in-alt surged grand and clear.

"Say, Hal," Nash spoke, out of his lone corner by the fire, "would you play the 'Blue Danube Waltz,' just once?"

The melody broke; shattered, sickeningly. Hilary's hands fell into her lap, like dead things. She lifted them; tiny beads of moisture had gathered on her forehead. Her face set like a rock, and she played—the "Blue Danube Waltz."

When she had finished, "I like that piece," Nash said, rising, "and you certainly play it fine, Hal." He came and stood near her: she was sitting perfectly still, staring ahead of her. "Ain't you goin' to play any more, Hal?" he asked gently.

Mechanically she started something. Nash suddenly knelt down, and caught up one of the soft folds of her dress that was lying out behind her, and held it to his face. Then, with a last glance at the bowed dark head, he too slipped through the open door, and into the black outside.

It was utterly still; yet he thought he caught the sound of voices, indistinct, from down the drive. He listened: yes, that was Louis' laugh—nervously high-pitched. Brent must be with him, then; the two had met, in their tumultuous wanderings, and joined forces. But the sounds came less and less distinct: they were walking in the opposite direction—away from the house, towards the gate.

Nash went swiftly along the veranda, till he came to the end of the bungalow that lay towards the servants' quarters. Here he stopped, and listened again. The stillness was deeper yet, and more dense. But far over to the other side of the place, he could see a white

shadow moving; it was that he had searched, with fearful eyes. Once he caught sight of it, he took the steps at a bound. From Ping's cottage just ahead came the flicker of the candle Li left burning when he went to walk.

Nash fixed his eyes on it. Then he turned, and gazed back at the house. The window at this end Louis had overlooked: he could see the long, soft-lit room, and that brooding figure in one corner, playing as though chained to the spot.

"Hal—Hal"—he stretched his arms towards her, with a guttural, hoarse cry. She was playing the *Fidelio* music—the wonderful song with which the prisoners of two or three generations, released, greet the light. To Nash in the blackness, that pure exaltation filtered out strange and sweet. "Hal!" he cried again, but less bitterly.

Before him, in the dark, gleamed a broad Line. He set his teeth, and without another backward glance, walked straight towards it.

Five minutes later, a shrill whistle rent the

quiet. Brent and Louis, at the gate, wheeled sharply. "My God!" cried Louis, "Look there!"

Out of the black, a thin tongue of flame rose: creeping up the window of Ping's cottage. Both men tore into a run. But they were almost an eighth of a mile away; the flame flared higher, and brighter—it had caught the light bamboo curtain. Then, suddenly, it went out. And as Louis, panting, pulled up first before the Line, on the other side of it appeared Nash Comer.

His hands were burnt, but he seemed unconscious of them. His face, under the one lantern of the passage, was supremely calm. "It's all right, Louis," he said. Louis was staring, ashen with horror. "I touched him—I had to. His shirt was afire. Let Doc. tell Hal, will you? Louis, you turn Hal over to Doc."

Brent, arriving at that moment, gasped thickly, "*Comer!* what in the name of Heaven——"

A woman pushed past him, started blindly to cross the Line. But between her and it there darted a white figure. And when she looked up, she saw forbidding her, the stony impassivity of a Chinaman, standing behind the Line, with his arms folded.

XV

"WHAT I never shall understand," said Brent for the hundredth time, "is how that fire broke out."

They were sitting, he and Louis, in the denuded living-room; which, stripped of its cushions and pictures, books, music, everything, had something of the stark dignity of a vast skeleton. The smell of chloride and carbolic was everywhere; for quarantine was declared lifted, and the process of disinfecting had been drastic and exhaustive. The day before, they had buried Nash.

"It'd be easy enough," Brent went on, "if the candle had been nearer the bed; but Li says it was at least three feet away, and he doesn't see how Ping could have reached it, without getting out of bed—which, of course, he was too weak to do."

"Well," returned Louis, "he's obstinate in his story: that he turned over far to the edge of the bed, and the next minute saw that his shirt was afire. Funny thing, though, that he didn't whistle for a good three minutes after—and meantime Nash had seen the blaze."

"H'm"—Brent passed his hand over his eyes with a tired gesture—"well, it's a mystery. All we know of it is that Ping was saved, and Comer"—he broke off with Comer's own brusqueness.

Louis cleared his throat. "Er—by the by," he said, after a moment, "Li says Ping's dressed, and presentable, and wants to report before you and Harry go. Rum little yellow face, I wonder what he's up to now?"

"Probably some idea of apologising for getting his life saved," Brent laughed shortly. "It's Hilary he wants to see, I suppose."

"No, Li said all three of us. Jove, I hope it won't upset her—Harry. Since that one collapse, just at first, she's been the pluckiest

little creature! And for Nash to die like that — Louis' impressionable mouth twitched a little. "If we—if she hadn't come here to me, he'd not have died," he blurted. "You know that."

Brent looked thoughtful. "I wonder?" said he.

"Why, what do you mean? The whole reason for his happening to die was because he saw that Ping was in danger. If he hadn't been here where Ping was——"

"Hasn't it ever occurred to you as odd that just before he 'happened' to die, he turned over to Hilary every security he owned? His lawyers sent her a list, and it tallies to the last decimal with what Nash gave her."

Louis changed colour slightly. "Look here, you don't mean—why shouldn't he turn everything over to her? She was going off alone—he was sending her"; to save his life, Louis could not have kept that resentment from creeping into his voice; "he could have

made as much again in six months. He had the devil's own luck. Why shouldn't he——"

"Why, indeed? But you'll admit, perhaps, that it *is* odd that Li should have found one of those short matches Comer used, outside Ping's window; while Comer went over there to *put out* the fire."

"I say, Brent"—Louis got up, with an abrupt move—"don't think of anything more horrible to add to this. I think Harry would go out of her mind, if she thought—and anyhow, it couldn't be," he added defiantly. "Nash died through rushing to save a man whom he knew to be helpless in the midst of fire. Why, any man who was a man would have done the same."

"And not necessarily paid for it with his life," said Brent quietly. "The question of surviving an attack of cholera is almost entirely a question of power of endurance. Comer had none, and he knew it. During that bronchitis of his I told him so a dozen times."

"Yes, but——"

"And the desire to set Hilary free had become almost a mania with him. He *was* mad on that one subject. Well, then, with the points in evidence I've mentioned——"

Louis interrupted vehemently. "You can talk about it as though it were a case in your medical journal! Well, I can't. And for Heaven's sake, don't suggest it to Harry—no matter what the evidence points to. Let her go away in what peace of mind she's been able to save; and when she gets to England with her people the whole wretched horror will fade, perhaps."

Brent looked him full in the eyes. "I'm not apt to forget to consider Hilary," he said. The antagonism that had been sunk during the last days all at once sprang up between the two. After all, Hilary was free; and they stood on equal ground regarding her—and the future.

"No, I dare say you aren't. Understand this, then: I'll never give her up—till she

makes me." Over Louis' face came the old savage look. "And you needn't think to push your own ends by suggesting to her that Nash——"

"That Nash what?" asked Hilary, coming into the room. She may have been plucky, but her voice shook now when she spoke her husband's name; and she looked from one to the other of the two men, instantly on the defence. "That Nash what?"

"Nothing," said Louis briefly. "Brent and I were merely having a little farewell talk. Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you." Hilary took the chair he drew for her—the chair farthest away from Brent. She wore her favourite soft white gown and a little simple white hat. Yet in spite of it she looked older; and her speech lagged as though held back by some possessing, preoccupying thought.

"Well"—Brent's attempt at briskness was rather a failure—"are you quite ready?"

"Yes"—she turned to him with the vague

satisfaction of a weary child to some one who unconsciously rests it. "Everything is done. Even—do you know, I saw Li just now erasing the Line. Oh, I don't want to be hysterical, when Nash showed such iron courage—I don't want to be a coward, but——"

She rose, and walked over to the long windows, her lip trembling uncontrollably. "It's all right," she said, after a moment. "I'll carry this through. I'll go to England and see my people, just at first, and then—I'll keep my promise to Nash. It was the one promise he ever asked of me. I'll go back to work, as he was sure would be best; I'll try it for a year. And after that——"

"Yes—after that?" It was Louis who echoed the momentous question; but Brent felt she must hear him crying it out through the big, bare room.

"He said"—Hilary spoke slowly—"everything will come out the best way for everybody. Oh, that terrible afternoon! I felt all through it something sinister; and now

it almost seems as though he must have *known*. As though——"

"Impossible, Harry!" Louis flashed a threatening glance at Brent. "Why, you know—we all know—Nash died by a horrible accident. He saw the flame, he realised that Ping was in fatal danger, he dashed across the Line. It was one of those instant, instinctive——"

"Please seh, Misteh Louis, can do inside?" At the door appeared a small, deprecating Chinaman, newly soaped and starched, and regarding the three Europeans with the nearest approach to interest that two beady eyes, plus illimitable shiny blue linen, can convey.

"Oh, hello, Ping"—Louis glared at the insignificant yellow creature, who had balked him of his great desire—"yes, come in. Say what you have to say."

"How do you, Ping?"—As the little man in so much clean clothes advanced into the room, Hilary went forward and looked at him, long, unreadably.

The beady eyes gazed back without blinking. "How do, missee. Missee Comeh think velly bad thoughts this boy Ping. Missee think he killee my husband."

"Oh no, Ping—no, no. I am proud, very proud, that my husband saved you." Hilary gave him another long look; and then abruptly turned away to sit down beside Brent.

"Yes—he save me, Misteh Comeh."

Something in the monotonous Chinese voice made the boy's master look up sharply. "Here, Ping, if you've anything to say, get on with it. Mrs. Comer is waiting for you."

"Yesseh. Me gotchee plentee say. Me velly flightened Chinese gods. Gods come one, two, three nights. Gods say——"

"There, that'll do for the gods—hurry up."

"Yesseh. Gods say, 'Ping Min Hu, you been velly sick man. Gods makee you allee same well. Now you tellee velly wicked lie——'"

"What lie?" bolted Brent, involuntarily. Hilary sat forward, very pale.

"You no tellee tluth, you velly soon die again, gods say," pursued the Chinaman, immovably. "Me plomise gods tellee tluth."

"Yes—yes, well out with it!" muttered Louis.

"Me sleepee in bed; Li Chan Wu walkee walkee far side, outside. Me wakee up, quick: Misteh Comeh he lookee me velly fielce. He tellee me, 'you makee one piecee scleam, me killee you chop-chop.' He say, 'you velly still, you allight.'"

There was the silence of death in the room. Only Hilary unconsciously moved closer to Brent. Louis was white as her gown.

"Misteh Comeh stlike match, makee file——"

"*Ah!*" Hilary clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Makee file all same me shirt. Me keepee velly still; file go out. Misteh Comeh makee nother file, allee same bamboo cultin. File velly blight, but no can do velly big. Misteh Comeh putee out, his hands."

"My God," cried Louis, under his breath, "this is impossible!"

"Me tellee tluth. Misteh Comeh say, 'you no tellee you makee file, me killee you allight; he say 'you tellee tluth, me allee same dead, me send wicked spilits, cut you twentee hundled pieces. Me no can help. Me mo' flightened Chinese gods, than Misteh Comeh wicked spilits. Can do file out, Misteh Comeh he blow whistle. Most noble gods"—the man lapsed suddenly into Chinese—"this is the truth."

He made an odd, very deep reverence; and noiselessly went out.

Always there was that deathly silence. Louis took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. He did not look at Brent. Finally Hilary spoke in a dry, strained voice—sterile of emotion.

"*He* lit the fire. *He* blew the whistle. He —Nash—*he lit that fire himself!*" She fell towards Brent in a dead faint.

He caught her. Louis hastened for brandy.

Then when Brent was gently forcing it through her lips Louis said, "Brent, I'm going to obey his order—Nash's order, that he gave me that night. When I pulled up there before the Line, he said, 'let Doc. tell Hal. Louis, you turn Hal over to Doc.' I—I'll do it, Brent."

Hilary, opening her eyes, saw the two men clasp hands, and look hard into each other's face. Then Louis was gone.

She sat up, shuddering—remembering. "It's true," she murmured brokenly, "*Nash* lit the fire. He lit it himself; and I'm still alive. *I*"—a sob caught her voice—a sob of bitter scorn—"but of course I'd be alive; I'd come out safely, guarded and shielded and given everything, while Nash——" the look she fixed on Brent made him turn away his eyes. "Nash even had to die, to give it me—and such a death!"

"Yes, Hilary"—Brent leaned over her, speaking huskily—"but remember, he chose it. I think that makes it not more awful, but less. That it wasn't, as Pembroke said,

a horrible accident, but the supreme act of a life made up of splendid acts. Don't you see that?"

She sat up, covering her eyes. "I can't seem to see anything, except the ghastliness of it. I feel like a murderer—I felt that anyhow, because it was I who brought him here at all. But now"—she drew her hands down from her face, and looked at them shrinkingly—"I see blood on them!" she cried, "but oh, John, I did try to get him to let me make it up to him—you know I did!"

"I know." Still Brent could not gain entire control of his voice. "And he wouldn't have it. So you mustn't let it torture you, what he did. Think of this: he wanted above all things to do it; to him it wasn't a sacrifice, but his crowning joy. Just as everything he did for you was a joy, and natural to him, this must have been—or he wouldn't have done it."

She was gazing at him, the first horror fading in her face. "You think that? But

I know you'd not insult me with kind fabrication. And—it was odd—you always knew him better than I did. Perhaps "—even with the faint admission, her mouth looked less drawn—"you may be right."

"I'm sure I am," he said firmly. "And sure, too, that the last thing he would have wished would have been for you to find him out; the first thing he'd ask, for you to forget. Won't you—will you try?"

He lifted her up, and straightened her little hat. She continued to gaze at him, with that struggling of bitterness and belief in what he said. "I will try," she said, finally, "yes, John."

"Then you must first come away from here. Your carriage is down at the gate, waiting—come!"

"Yes—when I have said good-bye to Louis."

She left him. And found Louis—standing at the door of a room he had just unlocked. When she saw what it was—"Oh, don't, don't!" she cried, turning away.

But he took her arm, and led her in. "It's not the white room I want to show you," he said; "it's this." The room in its pure peace was unaltered; Louis had made the men leave it till the last. But on the tabouret to which he had led her, the red roses."

"I know a little verse," he said unsteadily, "perhaps you know it too? It's from the Arabic:

> "Unto the end: through a thousand kisses,
> A thousand caresses, a thousand pains;
> Till the roses of passion have lost their petals,
> And nought but the perfume remains!"

He lifted a handful of the brown rose-leaves, and the subtle fragrance of them filled the air. Hilary, with a quick little breath, lifted some too. And even in the grimness of the recent revelation, she smiled—with singular sweetness.

"There *is* the perfume, Louis," she said softly; "there always will be." And standing within its fine delicacy, she kissed him.

Then he took her out and gave her to Brent.

The three stood in the threshold of the place for a moment. The chalk line, man had drawn for his own protection, was gone; with the going of the treacherous disease. There lay the broad pathway, open and free and bathed in sun, leading to the road. Brent and Hilary went down it, without looking back.

And Louis was left alone, staring at his big, rifled room; companioned only by the stillness of his empty house. He sank into a chair, and looked drearily about. Then—it came to him then, that he too was free: to go down that sunny pathway—but where? Where had he to go—what was there down the road that he cared at all to find?

For a moment he gazed at it with gloomy eyes. Then, suddenly, he caught up his hat. "By Jove," he cried, "I'll go and find out if Betty *is* engaged!"

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